

## **Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey**

*Episode 40: Breaking New Ground in Eco-Theology*

*Guest: Greg Sterling, The Reverend Henry L. Slack Dean of Yale Divinity School and the Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament*

*Description: Greg Sterling, dean of Yale Divinity School, and President Peter Salovey discuss the Living Village Project, which will be a landmark on Yale's campus and a replicable example for divinity schools, places of worship, and academic institutions to follow worldwide.*

*Publish Date: October 10, 2023*

### FULL TRANSCRIPT

**Peter:** Hello, everyone. I'm Peter Salovey and welcome to Yale Talk. The design of the building, as architectural critic and historian Reyner Banham once posited, should reflect the values of the people who will use it. In the coming days, Yale Divinity School will break ground on a building that reflects its values, particularly those of eco theology and environmental stewardship. The Living Village will be a landmark on Yale's campus, and a replicable example for divinity schools, places of worship, and academic institutions to follow worldwide. In advance of the project's October 11th groundbreaking, I'm pleased to welcome Yale Divinity School Dean Greg Sterling to today's program. Greg has advanced the Divinity School on several critical fronts over the course of his deanship. In addition to leading efforts to create the Living Village, he has consistently raised a strong voice for the theological and moral imperative to address inequality, and injustice. The school, meanwhile, has reached its strategic goal to cover all tuition costs for students with demonstrated need. And the Andover Newton merger, that Greg helped to engineer, has enriched the campus experience and the ministerial formation of Yale Divinity School students. Greg, thank you so much for your good work, and for joining me today on Yale Talk.

**Greg:** I'm delighted to be here Peter, thank you very much for the invitation and for the chance to work with you.

**Peter:** So let's start with the Living Village project. After all, its historic, and it's an example of how we're using Yale's campus as an active laboratory in pursuit of the most effective ways to reduce carbon outputs and energy usage. So, tell us more about the project, how it began, the vision behind it, the approach we will take, and what'll happen when it opens.

**Greg:** So when I became dean, back in 2012, I knew that we needed to do something about housing. But we never wanted to simply build apartments. We knew that we wanted to build something that would be sustainable. But in all honesty, all I knew about at that point in time was LEED certification. So I had a conversation with the chair of our Dean's Advisory Council—this was in 2013-14—and he asked me, 'do you know what the Living Building Challenge is?' And I had to confess, 'No.'

**Peter:** Yeah, I don't think I knew about it either at the time.

**Greg:** Well it was pretty new. It was launched in 2006 by Jason McLennan at a conference in Denver. It was very much in its infancy. He sent me an article by Jason McLennan, and I read it, and I thought this is exactly the standard that we need to embrace. It's audacious, and it went well beyond LEED certification. Jason McLennan offered to sell the standard to the parent organization, the U.S. Green Building institute for a dollar, as a way to offer a more advanced standard--beyond LEED Gold or LEED Platinum. And they thought about it, and eventually declined. So he started his own organization. And when I read this, I thought, this matches our aspirations.

**Peter:** And the challenges is serious, right? You have to generate, yourself, 105% of the electricity you need, right? You have to give electricity back to the grid. You have to handle all your own waste. You have to clean all your own water. Am I missing anything?

**Greg:** Jason likes to use the image of a flower. And even before he formulated the Living Building Challenge, he was doing this. The idea is a flower is rooted in place, like a building it's not movable, so it has to have all of its own energy. So your point about 105%, all of its own water, it also has to take all of its nutrients from one place, and when it dies it has to give something back to the Earth from which it sprang. So the idea is to think of these as regenerative buildings. It's actually that they have a positive impact on the environment. So with this, he developed what are called pedals for the standards, and there are a series of those. It has to be balanced with the nature in the place. Water has to be net positive energy as you just said, but health and happiness and well-being is one of the pedals. It has to promote human welfare and human interaction. There's also a very long materials list, a red list. So nothing that is known to pose a threat to human life or any other life can be used. There has to be equity, social justice is part of the standard. And I very much appreciate the last petal: it must be aesthetically appealing. So beauty and inspiration are part of it.

**Peter:** So it's a very aspirational list for putting up a building because it's not just how you're going to build the building, and how it's going to work once it's occupied, but also people have to be happy working there. And to make all of that happen is a real challenge. So this will be the largest Living Building Challenge executed on, right, ever--once it is built. Is that still true?

**Greg:** Residential structure.

**Peter:** I see.

**Greg:** Yes, so, the Bullitt Center--I don't know what the square footage of the Bullitt Center in Seattle is. That was one of the very first. It's the most famous corporate building that has the Living Building Challenge certification. But the way they do this is, after it's built, you cannot be fully certified for a year. So you have to demonstrate that this actually works. I don't think you have to take a happiness test, but...

**Peter:** I could help with that, being a psychologist...

**Greg:** We may appeal to you to help with a survey. But I think we will try to do serious assessments of how people react, because it's not like a normal building. You can't just go in and turn the thermostat. You have to think about the amount of water you consume. So, 20- to 30-minute showers, probably not going to be acceptable in this building. So there will be some adjustments that people will have to make.

**Peter:** Now I like this because as a psychologist, we're in the business of behavior change. And the way in which this building is designed, and the way in which one has to live in these residences, involves having to modify your behavior. It creates a kind of awareness, a mindfulness, about how you impact the environment that simply walking into a standard office building, or even a standard apartment building doesn't. That's pretty interesting. Just as a side note, Yale has a carbon tax on its buildings. So already, we're trying to change behavior by encouraging, incentivizing, our employees, our students, to live in ways that have a reduced carbon footprint, because it will cost your unit more money if you don't. But you're doing more than that. Don't you have a tax on air travel at the Divinity School?

**Greg:** We do. So we started this a number of years ago, and I spoke to the faculty, and this was put to a faculty vote, but I made the point to them that when we travel by air, we are emitting a good deal of carbon. And I plead guilty to being the chiefest of sinners on such an account. It's a very simple tax. You could calculate it by flight. It's \$50 for a domestic flight and \$100 for an international flight. And then you take that money and use it for something that would enhance sustainable life in the school. The first thing we bought: water cooler stations that have water bottle fillers. We didn't have those previously, and we were trying to get rid of plastic. We also bought a nice screen to show in our refectory where the food comes from, how much of it is organic, how much of it is locally grown. So that students would know that they're actually eating quite healthy food. We will also put monitors in the Living Village. There will be one inside, and there will be one outside. So if somebody's just a guest, and is walking around, they'll be able to see the energy that the residents of the building are consuming, and the amount of water being used, etcetera.

**Peter:** So that's in real time, right?

**Greg:** Yeah, that's real time.

**Peter:** Giving you a sense of the ecological health of the building as it's being used. So let's continue on the Living Village. It's obviously innovative with respect to its impact on the environment and in the way it encourages residents to live their lives, but also, you're hoping it will reduce cost for housing among our students and increase a sense of belongingness among the students and facilitate social interaction. So maybe you could talk a little bit more about those aspects of the Living Village.

**Greg:** Sure. When I first met with the design architects, I gave them this challenge: I said, we have a beautiful campus but it's a quad that looks to the past. It was very openly modeled on the University of Virginia. And while it's beautiful, it looks to a past that was not welcoming to all. The Living Village must complement the existing quad, but it must look to the future and make a statement of inclusivity. So the architects studied Yale architecture at some length, and we have portals, but we have no gates, as a way of indicating that we are welcoming the community in, that is, the New Haven community. The main quad is about the size of the Trumbull College quad. And what that means is that you will have facial recognition, across that quad, of anybody on the other side. It's not too far that you can't have that kind of recognition. There are designs in the building to promote interaction, especially in stairwells and in the common community kitchen, and what's called the Lantern, but just a lounge area. But also very wide hallways. And they'll be places where you can sit in the hallways and just visit with your friends.

**Peter:** I've seen this a lot in buildings that we have built, not all of them set to the Living Building standard, but much more of an emphasis on common spaces where people congregate, pulling people out from behind closed doors. I have a faculty office in the psychology department. The actual offices are kind of small, but the common spaces are wonderful, and it's clearly encouraging people to meet in the common spaces, so you see each other. People don't feel as socially isolated, as lonely, and don't retreat behind a closed door when they want to get work done. Let's talk a little bit about the way in which another part of what you are working on with the Divinity School complements the Living Village, and that is a curricular initiative around educating the next generation of, I think what you call 'Apostles of the Environment.' Can you tell us a little bit about the way in which the curriculum at the Yale Divinity School is evolving to be responsive to the environmental challenge we see globally.

**Greg:** So we're trying to do that in multiple ways. We were successful in raising funds for an endowed chair for an environmental ethicist, and the search is going on this year. A second way is I asked all of the faculty to incorporate environmental concerns in their courses whenever it was natural to do so. And I'll give you one example. I've taught a course on the Greek exegesis of Romans. So I get to Romans 8, it's a text that talks about the hope of creation, all creation groans, but creation will one day be liberated. So I use that as a way of addressing environmental concerns. The last time I taught it, I actually had them read the Pope's *Laudato Si*, just as a way of reading one of the most well-known religious statements on the environment. But all of the faculty are doing this whenever it's a natural thing to do. We've also just hired a post-grad who's going to help us with this program that I've called Apostles of the Environment. Going back to the point you made earlier, we're trying to change behavior, and we want students, when they graduate and leave, to be emissaries for sustainability, to champion this in the communities where they go and whatever ways they can. So we are trying to introduce programming that is very broad. We've had an active student group, Common Ground, for a long time. We have a brand-new fund that will deal with social justice and the environment. And so will begin doing some programming around that. And we're trying to develop co-curricular programming as well. And along those lines, I'm hoping that we can work collaboratively with the City of New Haven, that our students will be active in assisting in some of the programs that the city has. I hope that

we can serve local churches by sending students out to do things, like, 'what kind of planting do you have around this church?'--things that wouldn't cost a tremendous amount, and there are some organizations that will give grants for community gardens, so will try to encourage students to do that and help churches become active in those way. So the intent is to create a broad-based approach. A number of years ago, I was regularly invited to the State Department when they would have events that had some kind of moral religious dimension to them. So they were having a conference on sustainability. And for two hours, I heard people lament the fact that they could not get legislation through the House that was meaningful. And after listening, I finally said to them, 'there are four hundred thousand houses of worship in this country. Four hundred thousand. If we could get the ministers, and the priests, and the rabbis, and the imams, to make their congregants understand that the crisis we're facing is an ethical crisis. It's not just a scientific technological crisis. It also has a moral dimension. And all they need to do is persuade them of that, and then try to work from the ground up by getting these people to demand of the people they elect to office, that they actually address some of these ethical issues with regard to the environment.

**Peter:** That's so great. It's interesting that you would say all of this, because I'm remembering back to the early 70's. My family at that time lived in Buffalo, New York. And in the public school that I went to, high middle school, and then Williamsville North High School, in those early days of Earth Day, we would learn a little bit about the science of ecology. But I was also attending Hebrew school after school, at Temple Shaarey Zedek, and then later at the Hebrew Chai School of Buffalo, New York. And I remember taking a course called Ecology and the Bible, and it was all about the Old Testament basis for sound environmental practice--leaving parts of your fields fallow, the idea of crop rotation. It was super interesting. And it was a way of helping us recognize the relevancy of a religious education to issues of the day. It was a way of helping rebellious teenagers stay in these programs, since often people dropped out, but most importantly, we were learning about the environmental movement through our science classes in public school, and literally, through the Bible in Hebrew school. And it was wonderfully complementary. And it has stayed with me, I mean we're talking about something that I learned more than fifty years ago.

**Greg:** That's one of the reasons why we're building the Living Village is because, for us, it is a statement of eco theology. And I'll tell one other story that captured this powerfully for me. A number of years ago, Jimmy Carter was invited to be a guest at the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting. This is in a large auditorium, with three or four thousand people present. And he was interviewed by two faculty. And one of the faculty persons, said, 'President Carter, you have always been proud of your environmental record, but you have also been very proud of the fact that you've been a Bible class teacher during your life. Don't you find those two to be in real tension and to be contradictory?' So, President Carter said, 'Well, I assume that you're referring to Genesis 1: 26-27,' which charges humanity to exercise or to govern the Earth. The text generally is translated to have dominion over creation, and he said, well let me tell you how that text was always interpreted in the church that I've attended all my life. He said as a boy growing up, I remember the minister once a year

would preach on this text and would tell us, you are responsible for how you treat this Earth, and how you treat this Earth will have a direct impact on your children, on your grandchildren. It has an impact on this community, and you are answerable to God for the way that you treat this land. And he said, 'so no, I actually don't find it to be in tension.' And while one could give a much more detailed answer, his point was powerfully made.

**Peter:** Dominion can be interpreted a few different ways, and I prefer his interpretation. So, in addition to the Living Village, there are many interesting things going on at the Divinity School this fall. And we just came from one of them, that was back on September 14th. Yale commemorated, the conferral of M.A. *Privatim* degrees on the Reverend James W. C. Pennington and the Reverend Alexander Crummell. Now both of these men studied theology at Yale during the 19th century. They were black. And as a result, the university did not actually allow them to register formally for classes or even matriculate for their degree. So they sat in on classes anyway. My understanding is, they were not allowed to speak, they just quietly studied, and became great ministers. And we know this from their writings, which have been preserved. So they were subjected to great injustices in the nineteenth century. And though we cannot return the access and the privileges that should have been granted to them at the time, we can be proud of them, and we can commemorate their study, and their learning, and we can confer on them these master's degrees. The story represents a hard truth in Yale's history. At the same time, it can be used to reaffirm our commitment to a more inclusive Yale. And I know that this has been a special commitment of yours at the Yale Divinity School, where you have tripled the number of faculty from underrepresented groups and doubled the number of staff and students from underrepresented groups. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that, and about what that ceremony meant to you.

**Greg:** So we have worked very diligently for a long time at changing the school in multiple ways. Certainly by representation, as you pointed out, and perhaps most notably recently, bringing Reverend William Barber to our campus, and the establishment of the Center for Public Theology and Public Policy. But we've tried to do this in other ways, too. We named a classroom after Pennington, so that the man whose voice could not be heard would have his name said, every day, at the Divinity School when people have to go to class. We had a portrait made of him, and then we also had a beautiful portrait of Rena Karefa-Smart, who was the first African American woman to graduate from Yale Divinity School, had a very distinguished career herself. And those portraits now hang in our common room. We've tried to change our curriculum and our co-curricular activities to let this permeate the school as best we could. We realize, like you, that it's going to take a long time to actually come to grips fully with everything that's happened. And I can't say thank you enough, for your willingness to aggressively pursue the bestowal of the degrees. This may help you understand how this will play out at the Divinity School. A good number of years ago when I announced that we were going to name the classroom after Pennington, the students didn't just applaud. They got up on their feet, and then got up on their chairs, and stood on their chairs and applauded, because we realize that these are wrongs that have haunted us. And finally, we are coming to grips with them. And this won't be the final story, and I thank you for commissioning the study on Yale and slavery. I'm looking forward to reading

David lights book. I will read it with great interest and probably with a lot of pain, but I think this is the right thing to do. And I know it takes a lot of moral courage to do it.

**Peter:** I think the phrase that captures what we're trying to do university-wide is truth and reconciliation. Not trying to embarrass the institution, not trying to induce a feeling of guilt, but rather, a feeling of knowing. To know our history, and to think about the actions we take in the present, in light of that history. And that's why I didn't commission a report, but rather, a book-length narrative, written by one of the foremost historians of nineteenth-century America, particularly the Civil War, particularly slavery and abolition, in the world today. And that's Professor David Blight. And that's a different kind of approach. It's not a polemic approach, it's a scholarly approach, and I appreciate what the Divinity School is doing to complement that. So finally, let me turn to the fact that the Yale Divinity School last year commemorated its 200th anniversary. That's two hundred years since its founding as a distinct school at Yale. It graduated its first class of eight students in 1825, and ever since, for two hundred years, it has facilitated the rigorous scholarly engagement, but also the spiritual formation of leaders for this country, indeed for the world, through its community and its curriculum. I know somebody I meet with on a regular basis, Senator Coons from Delaware, very proud of his legal education, and his divinity education, both at Yale University. So two centuries of the Yale Divinity School. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that historic fact, but also a little bit about your highest ambitions for the Divinity School for its third century.

**Greg:** Thank you very much, Peter. One of the things that we've done over two hundred years is to produce, and you hinted at this, more presidents and deans, more heads of denominations and church leaders than any other divinity school in the country. And I think that's part of the DNA of Yale University, is you bring in exceptionally talented people, you train them rigorously, and then you send them out to change the world. And we've participated in that. And we don't want to change that at all. When I think of our role, I think, if universities are here to address the major issues that confront us in our lives as a global community, what's the role of a divinity school? It's to offer a moral and ethical window into how you address those issues. So for me, I'm hoping that we will help to prepare people who will be notable figures within the environmental movement. And will do so from a religious perspective--not to be embarrassed by that, but to own that and to champion it, because it can motivate people in ways that if you only appeal intellectually, you can't always motivate as many people. I hope that we can make a difference in the issue of racism in this country, largely through the people we train, and by the examples that are set. I think William Barber is an incredibly important moral voice in this country at this time. And he's unabashedly religious in his convictions and his perspectives. I think that's the kind of person we want to have train our students and inspire our students to do the same. We need to be more global. Yale University, as a whole, is very global. But we're a lot like Yale College--about 12 per cent of our students are global. That's largely because of student financial aid. We would like to build real bridges to sub-Saharan Africa, to South America, and not simply to function as a western, meaning North American Western European, intellectual and spiritual hub, but to be very global. So those are some of the ways. I could expand easily, but that's at least in broad strokes what I hope.

**Peter:** Wonderful. And I'm incredibly proud of the 200-year history of the Yale Divinity School. And while neither of us will be here for the entire third century, I'm delighted that we will be able to welcome that third century this year. Greg, I want to thank you for joining me today on Yale Talk, and for your inspired work as a dean.

**Greg:** Peter, I would like to say, personally, and as one of the longest-serving deans at Yale now, on behalf of my decanal colleagues, how much we have appreciated you and your leadership, the way that you've led the university, and you've led it through a most challenging time, the pandemic. But the university has made enormous strides during your presidency. And you, as a human being, have set a very high bar for everybody who is a leader at Yale. And I deeply appreciate your own humanity. And I know all my decanal colleagues feel the same way. Thank you for your presidency.

**Peter:** Thank you so much, Greg, that's so nice of you. And I'm looking forward to this eleventh year, and then we'll pass the torch at the end of the year. But there is no way that the progress this university has made over the last decade could have happened without the team approach that we have tried to take. When I think about our cabinet, the twenty-five people that are the deans, the academic leaders of this University, and our vice presidents and senior vice presidents and provosts who with lead, and particularly those involved in the operational side of our university, we couldn't do it without that group collaborating, working together and taking great pride in what we could accomplish, and being willing to aspire to take a wonderful university and make it even better. So thank you for that. You know all of us in the Yale community look forward to the Living Villages launch, and to the flourishing future it represents as the Yale Divinity School continues into its third century. And with the approach of the groundbreaking, I want to encourage our listeners to learn more about this historic project. And you can do that by going to [livingvillage.yale.edu](http://livingvillage.yale.edu). [livingvillage](http://livingvillage.yale.edu), one word, [livingvillage.yale.edu](http://livingvillage.yale.edu).

So, to our friends and members of the community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

**Peter:** The theme music, *Butterflies and Bees*, is composed by Yale professor of music and director of university bands, Thomas, C. Duffey, and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.