Collaborating Generously, featuring Dr. John Corrigan

Journeys in Research, Ep. 8
Recorded May 28, 2021

Evangeline Coker: Dr. John Corrigan, thank you for being with us today.

John Corrigan: It's a great pleasure.

Evangeline Coker: In your research in religion and in history you've written many books, and you are an editor and co-editor of many more. That love of writing really began in childhood, right?

John Corrigan: That's right. I love to write when I was growing up. When I was in grammar school, I would spend some part of each day writing, and by the time I got to be about 10 years old, I was starting to collect my own writings, which often included short stories but sometimes included jokes, sometimes long shaggy dog story kind of jokes, reports on the area's sports teams, my depiction of weekends with my family. Whatever I could think about to write about, I wrote about it. I had a little Underwood typewriter, an old mechanical typewriter, that I kept on a desk in the family room in our house, and sometimes during the day I'd sit down and peck away at whatever it was I wanted to write about.

Over time these writings began to accumulate in a pile on my desk, and so I got a big binder and punched holes in the typing paper and put it all together in a binder, which then I would bring to school because sometimes I'd want to add things into it while I was on lunch or something like that. Or my friends and I would look through it and read parts of it and talk about it, and sometimes I'd lend it out to people who'd want to take it home for the night and read through it. And it was the musings of a ten-year-old boy, and it was varied. It was all kinds of different things. It wasn't very complicated, but I think what attracted people to it were my short stories. I still remember one of them, which was called "The Beginning of the End," which was about dinosaurs who took over the world, ate everybody, and destroyed humanity and made it their own. It wasn't an accident, I think, that I wrote that story when I was 10 years old during the Cuban missile crisis, when all of us who were 10 years old were certain the world was coming to an end, and there would be no more humanity.

"Corrigan's Book," as it was called, which I kept on the rail underneath my chair, quickly filled up as a big black binder with all kinds of things. It was my way of writing and my way of, in a sense, looking back and editing my own writing, thinking about what I had written, and deciding where to go based upon what I had read. So, I just loved to write at an early age and just kept writing the whole time. When I got to be a professor, it was a very long, deeply ingrained habit of mine to write, and so my research was a way, in a sense, to continue to build a platform for my writing.

Evangeline Coker: When you started your journey in college, it wasn't actually in writing at first. You didn't go that route.

John Corrigan: It wasn't, no. I had a very strong interest in math and science as well. In fact, I used to always do better throughout my standardized test-taking years. I always did better in the math than the verbal, but I started in engineering. I started in chemical engineering. I loved chemistry. I loved biochemistry. I loved math, calculus. I took computer programming and coding. In those days, it wasn't called coding. It was called Fortran, which was a process of punching holes in note cards and building a big stack of them and then putting them in a machine, which would read the punched out holes in the stack of cards, and in that way solve a problem for you. It took a lot of complicated math to be able to do it. Nowadays, coding is a whole different sort of thing.

I loved all that stuff, but it just didn't leave me enough time to write. I still in some ways think like a scientist, and my research is still very much connected with the kind of experimental method, and induction, and the sorts of things we associate with science. Studying engineering and math in college just didn't leave me enough time to write, so I moved over into two areas I thought I could write in, which was English and history.

Evangeline Coker: Do you find that it makes a difference in your research, bringing in that scientific and mathematical expertise?

John Corrigan: Well, I certainly think it affects the way I go about my work. I try to talk to both humanities people and to scientists when I can in my writing, in my scholarship. I've moved into some areas of scholarship that have been at least one leg in the sciences. My work on emotion, in which I read lots of neuroscience journals and some chemistry journals even, and my work in the spatial humanities, in which I have a lot of recourse to scientific journals and scientific writings as well.

Evangeline Coker: Correct me if I'm wrong, you coined the term "spatial humanities." Could you tell us a bit about what that is?

John Corrigan: Yeah, myself and my two collaborators in this, David Bodenhamer and Trevor Harris, one a geographer one kind of informatics/historian scholar, beginning at the very end of the 20th century, we began to talk about ways in which we might incorporate GIS, which is geographic information systems, into writing in the humanities, and it sort of unfolded from there into a larger project of how can we find a way in which to bring some of the specificity and some of the rigor of science to our work in the humanities, and how can we focus on space as a topic that would enable us to do that. So we kept working at it, and kept working at it, and had some projects – some big projects – that we used as experiments to try to figure out how to do this. It had a lot to do with GIS. But we moved beyond GIS to a kind of broader notion of how it is that we can measure space, certainly in latitude and longitude but in other ways as well, and give a kind of numerical presentation of space, if you want to put it in the simplest terms, while at the same time embracing some of the pillars of humanities research, which has a lot to do with ambiguity and paradox, and the shiftiness of language and of knowledge, and try to get all those things together, which is a really daunting project. It's ultimately just a matter of trying to build the plane while we're flying it.

We had to coin a term for this eventually, so in 2007, we had an NEH project when we gathered people around a table for a while, and that led to us coining the term "spatial humanities," which now is sort of the standard way around the world to talk about this particular kind of project, of trying to join a scientific perspective of the humanities perspective with regard to the topic of space.

Evangeline Coker: So, talking about putting together this term and this way of thinking with spatial humanities, that involved interdisciplinary collaborations, right? And you do a lot of collaborating and networking with people from outside disciplines. Could you tell me how that dynamic works for you?

John Corrigan: Well, when you're in graduate school, you're trained in the humanities in a funny sort of way – in a very traditional way – which is that you are encouraged to think of your own research effort as akin to what a monk might do in a medieval cell. Where you kind of go off into your cell and come out a year or two later. Bingo! With a book. It's thought to be kind of a solo flight. A very personal and private project in a number of ways. And there are reasons for that, because in the humanities so much of our scholarship and our publication has to do with how we craft our prose.

In the humanities, it really matters what word you choose for a verb, because you're trying to persuade people of what you think through your prose as much as through a rigorous analysis of the data you've collected. In the sciences, it's different. In the sciences, you gather your data. The prose has to be clear. It has to be precise, but it isn't really through prose that you persuade your audience. You better have good data. You better be able to connect the dots. You better know the historical [and] the scientific contexts for what you're trying to argue. You better have a good interpretation that makes sense and is logical, but when you come to write it up, you don't trouble yourself over whether that's the right verb. You don't trouble yourself over what kind of adjective to use here. You don't do that sort of thing.

I think the two can speak to each other very well if given a set of ground rules about how that's possible, but there's still a lot of differences involved. My own work as a humanities scholar has been very much affected by my interests both in the humanities and in science, and that means learning to write with an eye on both of those audiences, and it means that I am very much benefited by collaboration with people who do very different things than I do.

Although I still do go into my monk's cell and come out a year later with a book at times. I often find it crucial to be able to collaborate constantly with people who do things that are a little bit different than what I do, because I'm trying to find my way through this forest of both humanities and scientific literature and benefit greatly from conversations with people, especially in the sciences, who can help me puzzle out a pathway through that.

Collaboration, I do so much of it, and it's helped me in my humanities work as well. I don't just collaborate with people who have a kind of scientific look at things. More often than not, I collaborate with other humanities scholars. I love to do it because it leads to great conversations, and it leads to all of this kind of stretching our boundaries and learning new vocabularies for things and thinking of new ways in which to talk about what we're interested in. I haven't

counted it up, but more than half of the things I write are collaborations, which is unusual for somebody whose home department is in the humanities.

In scientific publications, it's the standard to have four, five, six, ten, seventy people who are listed as co-authors. Everybody has their part to do. Somebody does the literature reviews; somebody runs the experiment; somebody runs the stat. analysis; somebody draws up the conclusions. There's this, that, and the other thing. It's sort of parsed out to people who are specialists in doing these different parts of the project, and the project itself is run as a collaboration. I think some of the writing is done more collaboratively than others. I think sometimes people just take the lead as the writer.

In the humanities, because we're not trained to do that, it's not our practice to do that, it's a little bit more of an effort to figure out how to write with other people, but it can be done. And it can be done not just by people alternating chapters – I'll write this one, you write that one. It can be done in a more organic way by writing chapters together and by imagining what a book will look like together and planning it all together, that sort of thing.

I like working with other people on projects now, and I'm eager to jump into projects with people when they suggest them or I come up with an idea that maybe needs two or three other people to work with. I really enjoy that sort of thing. So, I might be a little bit atypical as far as humanity scholars and the way I approach things. As I say, I still write my single author monographs and that sort of thing, but I do a lot of collaboration.

Evangeline Coker: You can get away with more of a writing style, or a specific writing voice, in humanities as opposed to scientific articles. How do you create a cohesive book with someone who's also a writer, and you may have different styles? How do you decide what that style is or who whose voice it's going to be in?

John Corrigan: Well if it's a true collaboration, you check each other's writing. There are plenty of things that get published that are, I don't want to say hodgepodge, but more of a kind of assembly of different voices kind of pushed together between two covers. If it's a true collaboration, you trade it back and forth. You offer different ways of saying things. You add paragraphs; you subtract paragraphs; you offer new sections to a piece. You really work on it together, and so the outcome I think is usually better. It's better, not just for the reader, but it's better for you the researcher who has oftentimes – because language matters so much, and how we think about our work – changes the way you think about your work, but it's got to be that very active kind of collaboration for it to work optimally.

Evangeline Coker: What might you suggest to another researcher who's trying to find the right co-author for a book?

John Corrigan: Well, the larger context for this is what does it mean to collaborate? The word that young scholars especially, and some other people in fields that I work in at least, often use is they have to *network*. It's an elusive animal, networking. What does that really mean? I think oftentimes people believe that networking means you're going to go out there and sort of access power, figure out how to make friends with people who have power and ideas and somehow find

a way into conversations with them. You want to network because it'll help you advance your career. You're going to network because it's going to help you publish something. You're going to network because it's going to help you get an invitation to lecture somewhere.

I don't think about it at all in that way. I think about how we engage with other scholars fundamentally as a matter of generosity, of how you imagine ways to be generous to other scholars. It's not a matter of this kind of political project that I think sometimes people have imagined from seeing too many Hollywood movies about what goes on in universities or in scientific communities or whatever. It's not so much about that. The way you network is by being generous to others, by offering to read their work, by offering them tips on where to look for information, by offering to look over their data, by sending them leads about where they might find more of the same data, by connecting them with other people you know who can help them in their research or who can offer funding or who might want to publish something that they've done.

You build relationships, which then become not networking but collaborative relationships in that sort of way by offering your own insight and by committing yourself, making your own effort to help others in their work. That leads to collaboration, and that's what we all should be aiming for. That kind of generous relating to each other that serves as a platform, then, for substantive collaborations. And by substantive collaborations, I mean you can really debate with your collaborators what it is you're doing, not in some kind of strange networked power dynamic where you simply say "yes, yes, yes," but a real collaboration where you can say, "That's not right." Sit down with your collaborators and say, "This isn't right, what we're doing here. We've got to change this." That's the kind of thing I'm talking about. I think that's only possible really when you've got a basis for collaboration that is more than just a kind of pro forma arrangement of power relationships that you think might suit your own ends.

Evangeline Coker: It sounds like that safe environment of being able to debate and challenge each other, while also remaining generous, it sounds like you have to find the right personality to work with, or personalities if you're working on a group project.

John Corrigan: You do, but certainly from my experience, I think that it's easier to find collaborators like that than you might at first think. I think so many people are like-minded, as far as what I've just talk about. They want to be good collaborators, and like myself they find that to be rewarding, and they find it to be useful to their work, and it advances their research and their thinking. I think that people are willing with just the slightest bit of encouragement to engage in that kind of scholarly relationship.

Evangeline Coker: You see research as something that goes hand in hand with taking risks. Could you tell us more about that?

John Corrigan: Sure. You have to find a way to. If you're an academic, and if you are an academic at a place that's going to require significant contributions to research to advance, you have to find a way to make those strong contributions while at the same time not going so far out on a limb that you run the risk of torpedoing your possibilities for advancement. So it's a funny dance, I think sometimes, that junior people have to do between trying to go after big game in

their research and coming up with manageable projects that can be completed within a certain time frame and at a level of achievement at which they will be able to offer that up as ammunition for their tenure in promotion cases.

I always advise junior people to pick manageable projects, but at a certain point, you're able to be more ambitious in what you do. You get a little bit more settled into your role as an academic, and your security as a tenured professor, and you can start to make good on some of those projects that you've always had in mind that require more risk. Projects that you don't really know very much about, but you think you could learn about and you think could make a really important contribution to your field. I think it's crucial to undertake those. I think after a certain point, when you find yourself positioned as a professor, it's necessary to take bigger risks. So you invest yourself in projects that might pan out or might not. You don't want to go down something that looks like a 90% possibility of a dead end, but you want to try something new.

It's easier in the sciences to think about this because you have the example of experiments that really just don't deliver what scientists wanted them to deliver. Oftentimes scientists learn from failed projects. Sometimes they learn things that lead them to even greater achievements, but sometimes experiments fail. It's harder for us to talk about that in the humanities. We don't really run experiments that fail in the same obvious way that they do in the sciences, but there are some similarities. A long time spent on a project that just ends up not proving very influential or important and gets no notice by other scholars, that's a failure. It's not a failure that we should be ashamed of, but it's a failure hopefully we learn from.

I think it's important to take risks. It's important to figure out projects that can leap ahead rather than just build incrementally. I've nothing but admiration for people who spend careers building brick by brick and do a project that they know exactly where it's going to go. I think there's an important place for that kind of stuff, but I think it's necessary at some point to try and leap ahead with something very different.

I do a kind of standard work as a historian of religion in America. I write textbooks and monographs and articles and so forth that cover a lot of different things in that field, but the two areas that I've tried to kind of jump ahead are religion and emotion and spacial humanities. So, religion and emotion is grounded partly, again, in my interest in science. Back in the 90s, I spent a lot of time trying to learn the emergent neuroscience of emotion. We call it by different names – affect or feeling or passion (if you're a philosopher) and all kinds of things – but I tried to learn a lot more of the science of it. [I] spread out more into philosophy, anthropology, sociology, my own field of history, to try to figure out what I could draw to each of those areas into a kind of common base of knowledge that I could interrelate to say something more about religion and emotion than had been said in my field prior to that.

So back to what I was saying before: a lot of collaboration, a lot of discussions, a lot of people telling me "you can't do that." Sometimes they were absolutely right about that. Sometimes I took it as a challenge, but by degrees piecing together an agenda that I thought was manageable but that also would leap ahead.

With the spacial humanities, we wanted to envision a different way of being a scholar in the humanities and of shaping the humanities into something that it hadn't been up until that point. Fortunately, the technology that we have had to draw on to do that has advanced wonderfully. So we're able to do more and more in the spacial humanities because the technology enables us to do it. But again, it required envisioning something that was different, and that was risky. Those of us who were doing this explicitly as spatial humanities 20 years ago or 15 years ago, we're always kind of looking at each other and shrugging our shoulders around the table saying, "I don't know if it's going to work or not, but it's really interesting. Shouldn't we keep doing this?" and we decided, "Yeah, we'll keep doing it. We're kind of rolling the dice here in some ways," but sometimes the dice came up good for us.

Evangeline Coker: Emotion is often, at least by the public, considered an ephemeral thing, and you chose to dive into it in a scientific way. But you could have gotten away with it just being an ephemeral affect. What made you go that route?

John Corrigan: That's a great question. So much writing in the academic study of religion would get to a certain point in interpretation and then say, "Well this is because those people were emotional." There's a generations long history of assuming that emotion was an irreducible datum that could not be dug into and could not really be analyzed, and so it became a kind of explanatory firewall in a certain way for some people who studied religion. They didn't want to move past that. They wanted to keep an element of mystery in religion. When it came right down to it, religion was kind of mysterious, and they didn't want to give that up. There's, in a certain sense, a parochial bias in some writing about religion, the idea that religion was a mystery. So that kind of parochialism seemed to me to be inappropriate and in the long run wasn't going to contribute anything to being able to make sense of what people do when they act religiously.

I wanted to push at that and to say it's not an irreducible datum. We can push past this mystery of emotion into much more. We can talk about the historical context for it, the cultural conditioning that's involved, the sociological frameworks for this, the family frameworks, the gender stuff, the class, how race has something to do with what you feel, how the amygdala or the cortex or whatever it is has something to do with this, and in that way break up this presupposition about emotion being a point beyond which you couldn't investigate. To break it up, to get to a point, where we could see how emotion, in certain sorts of ways, worked hand-in-glove with religious ideas and religious practice. How in other ways people's feelings challenged what maybe doctrine was telling them, or how they gathered as a community. There were things about emotion that we hadn't talked about before that we should be talking about. So, the long and short of it was that I wanted to critically dissect emotion to get to its analytical components that would help us understand religion rather than continuing to posit it as a point beyond which we could not investigate.

Evangeline Coker: It sounds like at the very least you're contextualizing these religious movements within a culture by looking at emotion, and maybe even going so far as to – I don't know if validate is the word but – help us understand why someone might go into that system of belief or this system.

John Corrigan: People are conditioned to a certain kind of emotional performance. When we're angry, we do this in this culture. When we're angry, we do that in that culture. We might not even show anger in another culture or in some historical period. Did jealousy mean the same thing in 16th century France that it does in 21st century New York City? It doesn't look like it did. Historical differences, cultural differences, I think there's difference with regard to gender, and there's difference with regard to race, as much as those are constituted by culture. There are all kinds of things to look at that help us understand religion better if we're willing to go down that path.

Evangeline Coker: What would you advise other researchers to do if they're considering taking a big leap into another field to help contextualize their own?

John Corrigan: I think the starting point is always start talking to people who are doing things like you would like to do, and start talking to people who are in disciplines or whose research areas are different from yours and who might be able to contribute some ideas about what you're wanting to do. That will guide you. So, the first thing is conversation.

I've always said, the best thing about being in academia are the conversations. In fact, I think the best things about any job are the conversations. Your everyday, go-to-work routine is partly about sitting at your desk and working, but it's also partly about who you're going to talk to and what you're going to talk about. Academia is great because you put yourself in this world. I don't think it's an ivory tower, but it is a kind of world in which the people you talk to are going to have interests in some ways similar to yours, whether they're scientists, humanities people, artists, whatever. You're going to have a common vocabulary in a lot of ways. You're also going to have wildly different perspectives on the world. You're going to have great conversations. Make use of that. You live in a world where all these great conversations are possible. Have them.

If you're going to go in a different direction with research, I think first of all, you start having those kinds of conversations. You're trying to figure out through real intellectual engagements with other people what might be possible and what might be a bridge too far, so you can get a gauge on the kind of risk you want to take.

Then I think you have to assume that as you move into another field, while you're reading the literature in that field and talking to people about it, you're not going to understand everything, and you're going to feel disoriented. Julia Flanders, who's a very thoughtful commentator on the digital humanities, she has this phrase about what people were doing in digital humanities 15 years ago, and she said there's a kind of productive unease that comes from working in this area. Spatial humanities is a kind of kin to the digital humanities. There's a kind of productive unease, which is a good way of talking about it because you're not going to understand everything you read, and you're not going to understand what people are saying to you in all these conversations, but you have to believe that eventually you are going to understand it. You have to keep working at it, even if you can't get it straight right away. Little by little, you piece it together. You start to understand how to put the square pegs in the square holes – all this information you're getting – so that in time, by process of aggregation, you can put together a

picture of the area that you think you want to work in and where you want to take your own research.

So, my advice is always be patient and assume that you're going to be confused at times about what it is that you're doing. You're going to have to go back and keep rechecking what it is that you're doing to see if it makes sense, and sometimes just being bewildered by how this could possibly fit together with this. But trusting that, in time, you're going to figure out a way to do it. You're going to figure out a way to do most of it at least. So, you got to get over that hurdle. Depending on who you are and what your project is, it might take three months, it might take three years, it might take ten years to really get a sense of what it is that you want to do, But you just got to put up with the confusion for a while and trust that it's going to sort itself out eventually. You have to do that.

So, I think you have conversations, I think you have to be persistent, and you have to believe that things are going in the right direction. And as a as a part of all that, you just have to be passionate about what you're doing. You're not going to advance it, you're not going to hang in, unless you're really passionate. You have to really care about what it is. You have to understand why it's important to you and why it's important to you now, at this point, that you do this kind of work. You have to invest yourself in it. You have to really just be passionate about it in order to be able to succeed.

Evangeline Coker: Thank you so much.

John Corrigan: Thanks for having me. It's been a pleasure to talk to you about this. Although speaking in generalities, this big canvas picture of things, I hope I've been able to offer some details as well.

Evangeline Coker: Oh definitely.