



## S5E1: Transcript Innovations for Human Flourishing with Dr. Andrew Serazin

**Tavia Gilbert:**

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert. Every Tuesday and Thursday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the science behind innovative tools that help human beings flourish, and we're thrilled to be back for the beginning of a new year's programming.

Our new season begins with scientist, entrepreneur, and philanthropy leader Dr. Andrew Serazin, President of Templeton World Charity Foundation. Stories of Impact Podcast followers will remember Dr. Serazin from past episodes, when he shared his passions and his plans for the future of TWCF, the foundation established in 1996 by groundbreaking thinker and philanthropic leader, Sir John Templeton, whose own life-long fascination concerned the intersection of science and spirituality.

Dr. Serazin is back with Richard today to discuss TWCF's latest initiative, the Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing, which will enable researchers to discover new knowledge, develop new tools, and launch new practices or interventions that make a lasting impact on human flourishing.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** We're super excited about the next year for the Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing, as the first step in our \$60 million commitment for discovery, development and launch of innovations. So we are working actively on all aspects of that strategy: launching new initiatives in discovery science, launching new programs in

translation of new breakthroughs into practical tools, and building a movement at the policy level, around using research on human flourishing to accelerate progress in other areas like health, education, agriculture, and climate change.

**Tavia Gilbert:** What inspires the interest in human flourishing?

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** There's something special about our place and our purpose on this planet. Ever since the creation of art and writing on cave walls, or the first legal codes, the first descriptions of rituals, you know, I think there is this sense of seeking something, seeking to reach our potential, seeking out to be in touch with something beyond yourself. Those are all questions, I think, wrapped up into this aspiration that we have.

How do human beings flourish? Under what conditions does humanity flourish? And how do we promote that flourishing in societies, in individuals around the world?

The topic of flourishing, really, is the most important question facing humanity today. That there's no one around the world who hasn't asked themselves in the past year, what is life about? What makes it worth living? How can we live a good life? How can I flourish? How can I ensure the flourishing of my family members?

And those are the questions really at the base of what it means to be alive, that we are probing, through this call for ideas.

**Tavia Gilbert:** How does Dr. Serazin define human flourishing?

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** Strong social relationships are really part of what we mean by flourishing, that you can find mutually positive, close social bonds that allow you to weather a lot of the challenges that one faces in life.

It's about having agency to deal with physical and mental health challenges, about finding meaning and purpose, which are deep human needs that we have, in the context of mutually supportive, positive relationships.

We flourish when we can find meaning and purpose in our life, and when we have the agency to navigate the physical and mental health challenges that we all face.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Aristotle first described the concept of “the good life” over 2000 years ago, so though TWCF is inviting world researchers to answer their call for new ideas to support human flourishing, the concept is ancient.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** And so these are old, old questions, old, old topics that were written about by the ancients, and the wisdom of world religions deals, in large part, with the topic of flourishing—whether that’s the foundational texts in Taoism, seeking alignment with the Way, or in Buddhism, trying to overcome the illusion of our perception and getting at what are deeper mysteries about ourselves in the universe, straight through to Christianity and the Ten Commandments, and in the Abrahamic Faith traditions. Those topics are part and parcel to religious experience and that wisdom echoes through the centuries.

What is different about our approach is to bring science to these topics. It allows us to formulate specific questions to measure very precisely the phenomena that we are talking about, and to design solutions, or to improve upon current practices or existing practices to promote aspects of flourishing that we, that we didn’t think were possible to promote before.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Dr. Serazin hopes that TWCF’s deep commitment to methods of open science, to applying rigorous scientific methods to the questions of meaning and purpose, to answering the question, “What am I here to do?,” will lead to revolutionary breakthroughs that improve human lives as dramatically as did the Green Revolution more than 50 years ago, when innovative agricultural technologies saved countless millions of people from poverty and starvation.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** I think about it, actually, in terms of what the genetic revolution did for agriculture. We need a new kind of Green Revolution. But

instead of focusing on crop yields, or reducing inputs and increasing outputs, we need a revolution in how we approach the topic of flourishing.

So science is beautiful in the sense that it distills some of these big topics into experiments. And if you can do an experiment that gives you reliable knowledge to apply somewhere else, that forms really, a beautiful cycle of innovation, that makes progress possible.

This revolution in how we understand human flourishing needs new methods, we need a new way of doing things. And the old way of doing science won't cut it anymore. You know, the idea that you have an independent group in a laboratory that is working alone in isolation, and in very specific and deep silos, not in communication with others. That process – the old way of doing science is inefficient.

Open science will make it possible to learn how we can promote flourishing around the world in a very open and transparent and reproducible way. Focus on the process of experimentation, and the protocols you use, make that fully transparent to other researchers around the world, in an effort to make things openly accessible, transparent, and reproducible. That is the kind of new science that we need in order to make progress.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Dr. Serazin's own background as a researcher inspires his quest at TWCF to understand not only how humans can materially flourish, but how human flourishing is possible, even in the most challenging material circumstances.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** We see ourselves as members in a common human family. We are one human family. And so the lessons that we can draw from those studies should be applicable universally. That is, I think, part of the vision here is that we're after some basic, common human truths.

When I was 18, I got the chance to go to West Africa, in Burkina Faso on a trip to collect research samples for a study we were doing on malaria-carrying mosquitoes. That involved traveling 100 miles in the countryside, stopping every mile, and going into

people's homes, sitting with them, asking them, you know, how their crop was this year.

And I was just so struck at the richness of their own life. They had absolutely nothing, there was no sense of material wealth in that community. This is abject, utter poverty. But what they had was a tremendous richness and wealth of social experience and social relationship.

**Tavia Gilbert:** This experience planted a seed in Dr. Serazin, teaching him at an early age a lesson of fundamental importance that would reflect in the values he's held ever since about his life and work.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** There's something very, very important about how people face challenges, about how people learn to cope with suffering and the value of suffering, and how a person can be resilient in the face of adversity. We can flourish despite the challenges that we face.

Our capacity for invention and innovation is married to this beautiful capacity for asking new questions and wondering about our purpose and our place in the universe.

When it comes to our definition of flourishing that has rested on feeling alignment and control and agency and making choices about our own situation, being able to find meaning and purpose, but doing that in a community, a web of positive social relations, those, I think, those are common human truths.

**Tavia Gilbert:** The hope, curiosity, and open-mindedness of Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing project are a direct response to polarization, cynicism, and despair.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** We are in unprecedented times. We're in uncharted water. Due to our own technological success, due to spread of people around the world, due to spread of information, due to, you know, the creation of cities, and provision of food resources.

Where we are in that journey, as a human species, means that the disruptions we face will happen faster, more disruptive, with more

destructive potential than ever. We are in a kind of an existential crisis.

And the response from my point of view, was not to lose heart, actually, it was to say, our work is doubly important: To move beyond easy solutions, silver bullets, and to really take seriously the idea that we need good people in order to create a good future. We cannot rely on governments or technology companies, or the authorities that have served as institutions in the past, we need to create this future for ourselves.

The response that I have, and the response that the foundation has, is one where we don't focus on pessimism or existential pessimism. Rather, we have existential hope. That absolutely needs to be accompanied by the action that's necessary to navigate the next hundred years.

**Tavia Gilbert:** What research uniquely embodies the values and vision of Sir John Templeton and Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing?

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** One project we're funding at the moment is to integrate compassion and kindness into primary health care settings in low- and middle-income countries, and see whether if you can improve the training and curriculum developed for compassion and kindness as a trait that is part of the healthcare system, that you can improve maternal mortality rates, that you can change childhood vaccination rates, that you can change the provision of mental health care services.

So that's an example of what we mean, of focusing on a core belief of compassion and kindness, and whether that can shift an outcome such as, you know, health systems' performance.

There's similarly other examples like in education, where seeking truth and thinking critically about the information that a child receives, and thinking about measuring the impact of that kind of approach towards education, and how that could improve the science and math scores of learners around the world.

So that there's a link between these topics, meaning and purpose and truth, and close social relationships and gratitude and humility and compassion, and linking those directly to outcomes that are critically important for the world.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Research like this means Dr. Serazin's existential hope grows, even in an age when science and facts, and reality itself, are being called into question. How does he believe those extraordinary challenges can be answered?

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** In dealing with any complex topic, we have to come at this from the point of view that the decisions people make are actually based on a set of factors – some are rational factors and some are factors driven by these limitations of our own mind – but, we hold out for the possibility and the likelihood that that there are fundamental truths to be had.

At the root of embracing of falsehoods, are some of these factors like listening, community, trust, that have been woefully disrupted, and if you could address those you might find a greater degree of responsiveness around the world.

It is not good enough just to sort of give "the facts" out. We know that just by communication alone that you don't have widespread knowledge and awareness of that information. People make decisions and people come to their own truths in communities, and there needs to be trust within those communities. There needs to be enough, sort of, fabric of social life in order to have a dialogue, to be able to voice concerns, to be able to feel like you are heard, you are listened to.

And so I think many of those other factors that we touched on, about flourishing, do play an extremely important role in seeking truth. You seek truth in a community with others, in pursuit of some social goal or some experience.

**Tavia Gilbert:** The Grand Challenges initiative recognizes that human flourishing cannot exist only at the individual level. It must be invested in and measured at the level of community and society.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** We need to think about individuals flourishing, and we also need to think about communities and groups of people flourishing and we know that a person finds their identity, their agency, their meaning and purpose in the context of others. So I do think they go together, and we're much more limited when it comes to the tools we use to measure flourishing at a group level.

A person can only find full expression of themselves in the context of the relationships they have. It's why one of the most beautiful things about life is love and the truth of love being really unbounded and selfless. And love cannot be practiced or felt really, in isolation.

More questions that have been asked, related to the basic, what I would call a spiritual impulse that we all have, to reach out beyond ourselves. We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience. Sir John actually referenced that himself: deep down, when we ask ourselves, "What is important in life? What is my purpose?" you cannot just think about you and yourself and the sort of smallness of your own life. You have to reach out to that which is greater than you.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Isn't there an inherent conflict between spirituality and science? Not in Dr. Serazin's view.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** We are inspired by religious traditions to ask new scientific questions that are tractable. We value that perspective. So for example, the practice of prayer – the fundamental practice of either asking for help, or for thanksgiving, or for expressions of worries and concerns and gratitude through prayer, it's a recognition that you're seeking help in some way. We are taking those practices and asking the scientific question, which is what are the mental and physical health implications of prayer, for yourself, and for your relationships with others?

All of these different practices we see as sources of innovation, sources of new ideas, sources of new studies to be done. It's a sort

of process of innovation that we put on these fundamental spiritual practices.

**Tavia Gilbert:** When the invitation went out for innovators, scholars, and researchers to apply scientific study to the big questions of meaning, purpose, and truth, TWCF received over 500 ideas submitted by teams of researchers working in over 350 institutions and countries around the world. From that pool, eleven initial awardees were selected. So, what happens next?

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** We're going to see this all in action over the next 12 to 18 months, across scientific research, getting psychologists and philosophers and theologians together, but we're also going to see it put into practice with educators, with therapists, with religious leaders.

What we're very excited about is building a community of what we call frontline workers of flourishing, who can take new knowledge and plug that into their own work with people around the world – whether it's gratitude or forgiveness or, or critical thinking, that they serve as the delivery mechanism for new science in achieving this vision to drive a process of innovation.

**Tavia Gilbert:** What is the impact Dr. Serazin hopes the research will have?

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** The global community has set some very, very ambitious goals in agriculture, health, in education, in climate, in governance, and in justice. Now, our view is that by investing in human flourishing research, we can accelerate progress in all of those areas. Fundamentally, progress on climate change, on education, in healthcare provision, and many other topics require people to deliver those technical solutions or enact those policies.

So we need to focus on the human beings in that chain of impact. And that's what I think that both the research and the interventions that we are developing specifically geared towards. These topics on flourishing are really an all-purpose tool that can be used towards accelerating progress on so many other areas that are important to human civilization and our future.

I would love to look back in ten years and focus on success in three different areas: One is that we've excited a whole new generation of researchers around the world who can feel successful in their own lives, in their own careers, by focusing on these topics.

Two, I hope that that mission is so attractive, that we can expand the circle of funders, both government and philanthropic, so that there are many voices around the table contributing their own resources to the topic.

And lastly, and I think very importantly, that we've been able to show practical impact, and relate that impact to other areas that people care about. And we've been so successful, that policymakers have a new attitude towards the topic of flourishing, that they reorient their own thinking towards these areas.

**Tavia Gilbert:**

Sir John Templeton and Dr. Serazin share curiosity and a mutual embrace of the seeming paradox between science and spirituality. And the Grand Challenges vision is to use innovative methods to find new answers to the oldest questions of how human beings can not just survive, but thrive.

**Dr. Andrew Serazin:** Immanuel Kant has this great quote: "Never out of the crooked timber of humanity, was ever a straight thing made." Which just means when it involves people, that's part of the beauty of it, is that serendipity and spontaneous order that can emerge and a symphony all of a sudden, flowers and we can see it. But it's not planned. It's not, an engineering project ultimately, it relies on the goodwill of people.

I think a lot about surprise and laughter and being comfortable with paradox. There's some wisdom we get from the Zen tradition of statements which are paradoxes, that reveal some kind of greater truth.

For me, flourishing entails being comfortable with the paradoxes that we experience, to be comfortable with our own smallness, but nonetheless our own power at the same time. And out of that, I think, comes the most joyous, hilarious, most beautiful experiences

that we can have. That's what flourishing is for me, is to be able to be present for when those moments of spontaneity and wonder happen, despite a limited lifespan, despite, you know, pain that you feel, that's what it means to be human for me.

**Tavia Gilbert:** This season on the Stories of Impact Podcast, we're bringing you the voices of global luminaries — world leaders in science, medicine, psychology, theology, music, dance, and more, all of whom join Richard in conversation about their definition and experience of human flourishing.

Over the next year, we'll hear from Dr. Deepak Chopra, founder of The Chopra Foundation, a non-profit entity for research on well-being and humanitarianism, and [Chopra Global](#), a modern-day health company at the intersection of science and spirituality.

**Deepak Chopra:** If you have meaning and purpose in your life, if you have worthy goals that are not only about you, and if you know how to make other people happy by giving them attention, affection, appreciation and acceptance, then that's the fastest way to be, quote unquote happy. When you make somebody happy, you automatically feel happy.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and National Medal of Science recipient, will share her thoughts about the parallels between science and faith:

**Shirley Jackson:** I've always operated from the frame that faith is the evidence of things not seen. And science is about discovery and proof. And so one is learning about oneself. One thinks about it from the religious frame, that one is learning about the world, and one's relationship to it in the scientific frame. And so I've always operated that way, but also what it means to me, it's not just about me, me, me. It is about feeling an obligation to help other people.

**Tavia Gilbert:** We'll bring you a conversation with Dr. Laurie Santos, Yale University Professor of Psychology and host of The Happiness Lab Podcast, who will offer her perspective on meaning and purpose:

**Laurie Santos:** All the research shows that meaning and purpose are critical to human flourishing. I think the problem is where we find our meaning, and where we find our purpose. We assume that a good life involves a rich life and a life of lots of material possessions, a life of accolades. But when you look at the science, what you find is that all of those things don't necessarily lead to a flourishing life. The happiness boost that you get from winning the lottery, you know, from getting the perfect job, those happiness boosts are pretty short-lived, unless they come with other things that give you purpose and meaning in life.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Wynton Marsalis, multiple Grammy-award winner and recipient of The National Humanities Medal, will share with us how music helps humans flourish:

**Wynton Marsalis:** Music teaches you how to listen harder than you play, because most of the time, your experience is listening. That's why I always loved to play with great musicians. Because I'm going to be spending a lot of time listening. And it's the way to understand, because listening has to come before understanding.

**Tavia Gilbert:** And Judith Jamison, American dancer and choreographer and artistic director emerita of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will offer her path to flourishing:

**Judith Jamison:** What makes me flourish is being around dancers, just being around them, you know, and working with them and feeling that energy coming off of them. We're all there, and we're all after the same, sublimeness. When that happens to you, it's — I can't even explain it — it's like your feet are not on the ground. They're above the ground.

**Tavia Gilbert:** — We're excited to bring you those conversations, and many more. We'll return in two weeks with our next episode, a discussion of the Science of Spirituality with Casper ter Kuile and Reverend Sue Phillips, two of the co-founders of Sacred Design Lab. Here's a preview with Rev. Phillips:

**Rev. Sue Phillips:** So much grounding, transmission of traditional wisdom, stories and songs that have sustained humans for countless hundreds and

thousands of years, stories of resilience and celebration, and mourning and suffering and survival. Those sound like abstract concepts, or they can, but to my mind, what they are, they're people's ability to survive life that gets transmitted in religious life, and that is desperately needed now at least more than ever. And I think that's part of what is at risk in this moment of declining participation in the pathways that have defined religious life in the past that are so utterly in a moment of change.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Stay tuned for the full interview. In the meantime, if you liked today's Story of Impact, we'd be grateful if you'd help us reach new audiences by taking a moment to follow the podcast, and to rate and review us. Join us on social media at Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Visit us at [storiesofimpact.org](http://storiesofimpact.org).

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox and Tavia Gilbert. Associate producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive producer Michele Cobb.

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