

Reverend Bill Crews in conversation with Walter Mason.mp3

**Staff facilitator:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Libraries Speaker series, before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced, and pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging from across all lands this podcast reaches. Today, we will be in conversation with Reverend Bill Crews and Walter Mason discussing the Reverend's new book, '12 Rules for Living a Better Life'. A straight talking, uplifting and inspiring guide to living a better life and becoming a better human being. Reverend Bill Crews has been named one of Australia's 100 most influential people, yet he's often considered a thorn in the side of his own church. He's a 75 year old minister and often inspires news article headlines that read 'What if we were all like Bill Crews'? He is the epitome of compassion and often controversial. He's Bill Crews, the charismatic shepherd of Ashfield in Sydney's Inner West. Walter Mason is the author of the travel memoirs 'Destination Saigon' and 'Destination Cambodia'. He is the president of the New South Wales Dickens Society and a well-known travel writer and speaker. Walter has spoken at festivals and conferences around the world and teaches writing and journaling across Australia. Welcome, Reverend Bill and Walter Mason.

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:01:22] Hello.

**Walter Mason:** [00:01:24] Hello there. So exciting to be here, Bill. Shall we get started?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:01:29] Yes, mate. Let's get started.

**Walter Mason:** [00:01:31] I wanted to thank you for this remarkable book, 12 Rules for Living a Better Life. I loved it right from the beginning. I found it inspiring and I found it moving. And I really admired your honesty. And so today I wanted to ask you a few questions about it about your life and about your philosophy. Yeah. The book is so much about important relationships you've had in your life, people who've influenced you, like the late Ted Noffs. And so I wanted to ask you about the relationships we have over the course of our lives. Do they shape us as people or are we already fully formed when we come into the world?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:02:12] Oh, no, we're not fully formed when we come into the world. Our relationships shape us. We we learn who we are in the reflection. We see in the eyes of the other. We don't find ourselves kind of sitting on a mountain top. We find ourselves in the nitty gritty relationships of life. I noticed once Barack Obama on the oration at the funeral of one of the powerful senators, said, we are grateful that he came

and walked with us for a while. And I think that's what influential people do in your lives. They come and walk beside you for a while or you walk beside them. And in that walking you and they get change. It's constant feedback.

**Walter Mason:** [00:03:00] And that that really comes across in the book with how you've been so shaped, because you didn't enter into the world as a good Methodist boy destined to become a preacher, did you?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:03:10] No. No, I didn't really think about those sorts of things, you know, at all. I remember at high school, I was really influenced by one of the Padre. He used to come and talk at the school, and he seemed to be a good, decent man, you know. But no, I didn't come into this in that way at all. No, that's often I sit and I look at I think, wow, look what happened. It kind of takes your breath away, leaves you very grateful. I'm very, very grateful

**Walter Mason:** [00:03:47] One of the people that you've walked with in your life, Bill, is the Dalai Lama. I love that chapter on the Dalai Lama. I found it so, so interesting. And of course, he's representing a great ancient religion. And you are representing a different, great ancient religion. I wanted to ask you, does religion continue to have a big influence on us or has its time sort of evaporated?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:04:11] Well, I find myself walking kind of with my legs gradually spreading apart on a on a slippery floor, if you know what I mean. But I think every now and then you've you just got to look at stars or have a beautiful day and see the blue sky between the green tree leaves. Or, you know, look at your son or. Your daughter or something, and you're transported into another. When you have a baby, that's probably for a lot of people. When I have a baby and I look at the baby and they say, where did you come from, you part of me, but you're not, you know. I know one woman once called her baby Yru. 'Why are you' so? It's what she called him. There are times we all know there's something bigger than us. We just don't quite often grasp it enough.

**Walter Mason:** [00:05:29] Yeah. Yes. It seems to be that sometimes I think we kid ourselves. Society, that all that's happened before us isn't continuing to have a big impact on us right now.

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:05:39] Oh, of course it is. And when you look deeper, you see a lot of the things society taught us aren't necessarily true, but they aren't you know, they teach us to stay in our place or to do what we're told or that there's a far deeper truth which says we're bigger than that. We are bigger than that. I remember I was talking there was a couple who I was looking after or looking after is a bad word they were trying to have a baby and there was a whole mess of it. Ultimately, the baby was born, and it died in a cot death. And I remember talking with the screaming, traumatized mother and father. And at that point, all they talk about is love. I realized then that all that matters is loving, loving kindness. That's all that mattered. Everything else falls away in the light of all of that. And I remember looking through her eyes and seeing this kind of tiny candle flame. And it had almost been blown out, but it hadn't yet. It was just one of the holiest times in my life. Three people, the mother, the father and me, you know. Yeah.

**Walter Mason:** [00:06:54] It's that connection that that's constantly happening. Yes. You write really honestly in the book about how you failed at friendships in the past. But how now at this stage in your life, you really ache for connection. Have you got any advice for establishing deep, deeper connections, particularly with our communities?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:07:13] Somebody contacted me the other day and said I would really love someone to love me. That's what this person said. And I thought, well, you're not going to find that love unless you give it. You know, so many of us are looking for love. And we forget that looking for love. It's also looking to love. And we can be quite selfish. Like so much of life. That's really important giving up things that we hold on to, it's really important that we give out what we want to take in. You can't get love by sitting there like a stone saying, love me.

**Walter Mason:** [00:07:58] Absolutely. I think we're living in a moment. I don't know if you disagree, agree or not, Bill, in which I think there is a great deal of selfishness, of asking people to give to us and not asking what we can give to others. What do you think about that?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:08:11] Yeah, but I think it's being challenged, being challenged by this COVID. Definitely. But I see it here because a lot of homeless people come here for food and they're much more grateful than before. People come up to me and say things

like, thank you. And I haven't heard all these things before. And I look at that where people in the street going and doing the shopping for a little old gal is too afraid to get out of her place. And you can see it's there. Often. I think we don't see it. You know, if you really want to see loving actions stand out, you go to the hills of the world and you'll see it there because it happens so often in normal life. It just we just don't see it all those countless acts.

**Walter Mason:** [00:09:00] It's a lovely sort of it's about developing a mindfulness in a way of what people are doing for each other. It's beautiful to hear that you think things are changing for the better.

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:09:11] Well, I think it comes and goes mate. Yeah, I we've been through a terribly selfish decade. We came out of the World War and the Depression much more aware of each other. And then we went through this terrible phase where, you know, we didn't think there were communities or things. And, you know, we're just getting back to that now where economic rationalism took more importance than anything else.

**Walter Mason:** [00:09:40] Bill, one of the ways you've given love back to the community is by establishing the Loaves and Fishes restaurant in Ashfield that's been there for how long now?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:09:49] Oh, what, 1989? It started. So probably 32 years. Something like that.

**Walter Mason:** [00:09:57] Wow a long, long time. What's the secret? It's not easy to to run something like this, this is a restaurant gives food to anyone who comes and wants it. How do you keep an institution like that running, Bill?

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:10:08] Hard work, hard work, hard work. So many people come to me and they say, oh, I'd love to do all this. You know, I'll go and set it up in my own area. And I don't because it's hard work and it's a commitment and it's a mission. It's not just a job. It's a mission.

**Walter Mason:** [00:10:25] It's a lovely old-fashioned idea.

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:10:27] Well, it's true. I don't think it's old fashioned. I think it's just true. This is one of the things I see that in lots of ways we're professionalising, caring for one another. And once you start professionalising it in a way, you take away the spiritual basis behind this, which says we're all in this together, we're all in this life together. It's not a job. It's a mission, you know.

**Walter Mason:** [00:10:55] Yeah. Yeah. What a great reminder you write in the book. I've noticed that the more I discover myself, the more I can give myself away and sit beside someone.

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:11:05] Yeah, that's part of the lesson. You know, sympathy is is when you talk to somebody who stubbed their toe and say, I stubbed my toe, so I know how hard it is, how painful it is, that sympathy, you know, but that's concentrating on yourself. Empathy is trying to put yourself in the other's shoes. And so, you kind of say oh your toes really hurting you. And to be able to say that you have to step out of your own shadow in a way, you know, like I was just thinking of this, you know, he can't get out of his own way sort of thing. You have to be able to do that. But you need but then you start to look at all the stuff. You hang on to all this stuff in our lives, you know, and all the stuff we hang onto. We then can't put ourselves in other people's shoes. It's like I was talking to a mother the other day who's got children, you know. And I said to her, you have to give your children away Like, I don't mean give them away, but but let them be. Because the more you let them be and the more put it this way, the more you hold onto them and cling on to them, the more they're going to run from you if you let them be and let them go. Like a bush turkey. Who chucks the young ones out of the nest? You know, if you do that, there's lots of squawking and crying and all of that. But if you do that, they'll always come back to you. It's the same if you give yourself away like it's a continual process. The more you give yourself away, the more you can empathize with other people and the more the more healing your relationships are or wholesome.

**Walter Mason:** [00:12:59] Bill pointing out that it's a continual process. And in this book, this new book of yours, '12 Rules for Living a Better Life'. You're very honest about your own process, about your 75-year voyage of discovery

**Rev Bill Crews:** [00:13:12] Oh 77, now

**Walter Mason** [00:13:14] 77 years of discovery. Have you ever failed? Have there ever been any moments along the path where you've really blundered?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:13:22] Oh, lots of regrets. Lots of regret. But what I have learned painfully is often you can circle back and that's what we forget. You know, you kind of blunder and move on and try and put that behind you. But it always comes back in the middle of the night, you know. But you can generally circle back and get back to that place with the person and say, oh, I really stuffed up there. I am really sorry. So many of us just don't want to say sorry. You know, they don't want to even say that it's 50 50. We've got as much a say in it as everyone else. And often the very things we hate in other people are the very things we hate in ourselves. So that really, we should be looking at ourselves and saying, I've got to fault that I hate in that person. How come I'm going at them when I've got the same fault? You know, I hate that person, I hate that person, because if you say that, you can be sure you've got exactly the same thing.

**Walter Mason** [00:14:33] Oh, that's so true, Bill. And I like this idea of circling back. There's certainly a lot of things in my life I'd like to revisit and make better.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:14:41] It usually works. Yeah. What I do is I get advice and often I will role play the circling back before I do it so that I get the language right.

**Walter Mason** [00:14:55] Yeah. Yeah. Yes. It's important not to blunder or to try not to blunder anyway.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:15:00] Yeah, because you can make things worse. But actually, I'd rather if things get worse, I'd rather have eliminated all the things I could to to stop them getting worse. Yeah.

**Walter Mason** [00:15:12] Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. We live in a time where it's really easy to get angry and express that anger online. We have problems with social media. It seems to be dividing us in ways that were more difficult 20 years ago when you had to write a letter to the editor. What do you think about the way we're talking to each other online now? Do you think it's helpful or can we make it more helpful?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:15:32] Well, I think people felt that the Internet would open up our choices. But often the choices we make are to read the stuff we agree with. So we get amplified in our own idea because we find lots of people who think just like we do. And of course, that then means you don't look at or relate to people who don't agree with you. Once upon a time, say, newspapers or books or that would print a diversity of opinions and we would work through them, and we'd be much more tolerant. But the more we just listen to our own opinions being amplified back to us, the less tolerance we've got for other views. I find that sad. You know, like on my radio program, I get a lot of people who don't agree with me, and I work very hard at putting myself in their shoes, kind of trying to feed back to them. What I think they're saying that all of a sudden everything changes. There's a lot of money to be made in amplifying people's divisions. We need to balance that a lot more. You know,

**Walter Mason** [00:16:46] I do know I think you're right, Bill. You mentioned your radio show, your Sunday, Sunday night radio show. I think one of the great sadness's that that we encounter over and over again in our culture is, is loneliness. And I know you talk to lonely people, although you encounter lonely people. Is there an epidemic of loneliness?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:17:05] Yes. Yes. When I started 50 years ago in Kings Cross, I remember we were called to a building where a lady had died five days before in her building. And it was awful. She obviously hadn't got any friends or anyone. Then 50 years ago, and you regularly hear of people suddenly being found dead after so much time and nobody's been to their door or something. There's a huge epidemic of loneliness. And it's a function of the society that we had or the communities we had up to this COVID. And I think COVID is going to make us a bit more aware of each other and that we're all vulnerable to each other in the past. So many people didn't even know their neighbours' names, you know. Yeah, that's terrible. And we're not built for that. We're built to be tribal.

**Walter Mason** [00:18:02] I like that idea of being aware of each other is sort of it's that circling back to your message about listening and connecting. I wanted to ask you Bill about the 12-step movement. It's something that I've had experience with my own life. And in the book, you talk about how it's become an important part of your own journey towards self-discovery.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:18:20] Very, very, very. If I had to run a church service or a 12-step meeting, I'd do the 12-step meeting. Basically, because hearing people talk, that was one of the things that changed my life in one of the groups I was holding. This woman got up and she said, you know, I came from a good home. I had everything and all of it, she said. And I found myself one night in a park, a public park, shooting up heroin with public toilet water. And she just told that story. And I thought, how brave. And then I realized that what we all need to do to share ourselves with one another. That's how healing comes. That's how really important relationships build. You know, and often, like so much of what we hold on to is just another story. It's like I thought all the things in my life that I wrote about up to then were hidden secrets. Mm hmm. You know, and I thought the world would open up and swallow me whole if I talked about any of them. And then listening to that girl or woman, I thought it's just another story. All these things I worry about are just another story. So, it's just another story. Why not tell him? And then they could lose their hold over you?

**Walter Mason** [00:19:46] And as you said, that's how healing comes.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:19:49] Yeah. Yeah

**Walter Mason** [00:19:50] We get rid of that shame.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:19:52] So much of our society is built on shame. One of the big lies in society that we have. To shame one another.

**Walter Mason** [00:20:00] Yeah. Yeah. Gosh Bill This is all part of the reason why this book, '12 Rules for Living a Better Life', is such an uplifting read and such an honest read. It's making me aware now of how you dare to be so honest. There's a profound message in the book that yours has been a life of doing, at the moment it is quite difficult for us to do things out in the world. What should we do when we're locked in? How can we be of use to people when our movements are so limited Bill

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:20:26] Shop for someone else? Yeah. Yeah. There's all these community Facebook groups, you know, where they share and say, you know, old Anna needs meals or someone else need something else. That's what we always used to do.



Just pull in and help one another. Just get off your bum and do something. Get off your bum. It might be that. It might be the no. I saw in England where they all clapped the NHS. They all walked out into the front doors and clapped. The national health people is one of the things I do. If there's some traumatic event going on when I'm doing my radio program is I get us all to find a candle somewhere a certain time. We all light the candle together and it becomes a community event. Hmm. Something like that. I think writing is a good thing just to write stuff. So many people think they can't write so many think they haven't got any talent. Yeah. Our society is so good at putting us down.

**Walter Mason** [00:21:31] Yeah. You encounter that constantly, don't you? People saying, I can't do this. I can't do that when it's obvious they can, that it's just this self-limitation that's been imposed. That's right. I love this message. Bill, get off your bum. That might be the title of your next book. I think I've got to say, as good Methodist boy saying that word on air is a bit scary for me.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:21:53] It's like it's like you can't discover yourself without doing. So many people want to sit down and talk about oh the world states and the world set in the world. The other terrible of this and the other you can't change the world. But if you go out and do something, you actually change the world for somebody else. Yeah. And there's a magic in that.

**Walter Mason** [00:22:15] Yeah, there certainly is. Bill, you've become very famous and influential Australian. But in the book, you seem to be often plagued by self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, just like the rest of us. Yeah. Yeah, I wondered about that. I mean, I was curious, what are you like at parties, are you this outgoing, great Australian or no? You find yourself in the corner.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:22:38] Ted Noffs used to say if you going to a meeting, turn up late and leave early because then you won't get caught up. But that going against what? I mean, I'm not very good at pointless things. If I can see a point to it, then I'll do it or I'll go. Sometimes birthday parties are nice. But you see, I'm in this position at lots of times where I don't know if people are sucking up to me because of the brand they think I am or because of the person they think I am. So that I'm very careful about that.

**Walter Mason** [00:23:12] Interesting. Very careful.

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:23:14] My friend John Singleton, you know. Yes, kind of the same in lots of ways that people will suck up to him because he's got money. But what about, John, the human being? And it's the same with me. What about Bill, the human being? You know, Bill Bill Bill, they'll say I'm ringing you up to find out how you are, but I'm terrible.

**Walter Mason** [00:23:36] Yeah, that's interesting. It makes me think that we often lead with the most obvious part of ourselves, don't we? You know, and you deal with people for whom their most obvious part is their homelessness and also sometimes their eccentricity and their inability to fit in with society. Well, you write about a wonderful character called Webster, who's become more and more famous, I think, after his death. Can you tell us a little bit about Webster?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:23:57] He was one of 12, grew up in England from an Irish alcoholic father who used to beat his mother, one of 12, who ended up working for Ramsay MacDonald in the 20s and the booths the Salvation Army booths got caught up with all these different sorts of things, was one of the probably the most famous speaker in Hyde Park at Speaker's Corner, I go speak there in his memory, and he came to Australia and they used to speak at Speaker's Corner. He became Muslim. He'd gone wandered through the whole panoply of life in lots of ways. A really unique thinker. Yeah, he and I, we became great mates like some of his thoughts were a bit odd, but he encouraged me. That was the thing he encouraged me.

**Walter Mason** [00:24:46] In what way Bill?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:24:47] Say what you think. Yeah. Yeah. Say what do you think? That was always really hard. Say what you think. Be who you are. And there was nobody more himself than Webster.

**Walter Mason** [00:25:00] Yeah. Yeah. Dealing with people like that throughout your life Bill It must have had a profound effect on your world view. It's what we are talking about right at the beginning, how we get shaped by the people we encounter. What do you do to keep your mind fresh and to keep yourself inspired? Because yours hasn't been an easy life. What do you do to keep yourself going?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:25:20] I meditate twice a day for half an hour. I find now that the more you actually imprison your memories in your body, so that I find as I relax my body more and more and more and more, you actually go back in time to where the kinks in your body are and you deal with those issues. You know, I think at looking at your reflection in somebody else's eyes shows you who you are. But meditation can give you the insight into who you aren't. Oh. So that you can learn a lot about yourself. And the deeper you go, the more spiritual you get. That's what I find, that you actually touch part of the light that's behind everything or the energy that's behind everything. I think the search for God or spiritual truths are really the search for what's in yourself. And the deeper you go into yourself, the more you see these truths.

**Walter Mason** [00:26:36] Bill, why did you write the book '12 Rules for Living a Better Life'? Was this part of this journey

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:26:41] I would either write a book? That's true. I'd either write about Bill or to call it the brand Bill you know Yep. And I couldn't do the brand, Bill. And I'd always thought about writing a book. But I always used to I didn't want to waken the crocodiles, you know what I mean because we've all got crocodiles in our past, you know. Yep. And I've been thinking about it. And then not all of those sorts of things. And finally, somebody came and said, why don't you do it? And so, I did it. And I'm really grateful because it it opened me out of a totally different person, I think, to the one who wrote that book now, because it's deepened me and made me much more aware and much more grateful, much more. And also, we often don't we don't capitalize. I don't know what the word is on our experiences. So we just put it all in the too hard basket, then leave it there. And I've put writing it in the too hard basket. And now I've found that it actually moved me forward.

**Walter Mason** [00:27:52] Well, I've got to say, Bill, that reading it has moved me forward. And I think anyone who reads it is going to be moved forward because of the honesty, because of the profound philosophy that runs through it. We're almost at the end. But I wanted to ask you a question, a kind of local question. You're there in Ashfield, and just up the road is Ashfield Library, which has almost as interesting a collection of people inside it as the Loaves and Fishes restaurant. What do you think

about the role of libraries in society, particularly how people who are on the margins sort of go to the library?

**Rev Bill Crews** [00:28:24] I was brought aware from that because I was in Boston in America and looking at health care projects that the hospitals run for the homeless. And during the freezing times there, the hospitals and the libraries have a very close relationship because so many of the homeless spend a lot of time in libraries because they are often very bright. And they can tell you everything that's going on in the world, everywhere they're critical places for people. When the lockdown happened here in Ashfield and the libraries were closed. We opened a space, a special space where homeless people could come and be at a distance and all of that, because they were lost without those sorts of things. We have a library here where the books just go out by the truckload, you know.

**Walter Mason** [00:29:20] Bill, you said that writing this new book, '12 Rules for Living a Better Life' was a sacred journey for you. And I know it's going to be a sacred journey for anyone who picks it up. I just wanted to thank you for writing it, and I want to thank you for talking with us today. It's been such a privilege. Thank you.

**Staff facilitator:** [00:29:38] Thank you, Reverend Bill and Walter, for your time and for a wonderful conversation. Reverend Bill, we wish you all the best with your book, "12 Rules for Living a Better Life' and with all future publications. Reverend Bill's book is available both physical and electronic formats at any of our Inner West libraries, ready for you to borrow or log on to our catalogue and place a reservation at any time, if you would like to purchase Reverend Bill's book, please visit your favourite independent bookstore online or in person. Bye, everyone, and thank you for listening and look out for upcoming digital content throughout the Inner West Library. What's on and social media channels.