

Is Burning Man a Party or a Pilgrimage?

Dave: Every year, Covid excepted, thousands of people head to Nevada's BlackRock Desert to enter a world that's unlike any other.

Molly Crockett: It's like going to a different planet. It really is like going to an alien planet.

Dave: And while from the outside, the Burning Man Festival might seem like a place for partying, drugs, and all around hedonism. To many who make the trek true burners as they call themselves. It can offer something deeper.

Molly Crockett: You understand what it's like to feel that boundless compassion.

Dave: Could burning man be a window into what life could or even should be? A connection, if you're lucky, to something bigger than yourself.

Alex Leach: I see Burning Man as a contemporary pilgrimage site.

Dave: And for the spiritually inclined, could it maybe even offer a glimpse of the divine?

Alex Leach: The first time I went to Burning Man, I could just feel the saturation of God.

Dave: I'm Dave DeSteno and I wanna welcome you to season three of How God Works. This season, we'll continue exploring some of life's deepest questions from the scientific and spiritual perspectives.

But we'll also have another big question in mind... what comes next? In a world where change is accelerating, where many are looking for new ways to find meaning, to connect, to be spiritual, we're going to explore some of these new paths forward. And since science, yes, science is showing that many people are being fundamentally transformed in positive ways at Burning Man, we thought it might be a good place to start.

Now, truth be told, when we first thought about doing an episode on Burning Man, my team said, Dave, you should go. To which I said, do you know me? I

hate the heat. I don't like large crowds. And as you might have guessed, I'm not a big partier.

And that's what Burning Man is, right? A lot of people in a hot desert who party hard and then set a big wooden effigy on fire, which makes it even hotter. Well, according to Princeton, neuroscientist Molly Crockett, that's not quite right. First of all, it's not some random tent encampment. It's a highly organized city.

Molly Crockett: So it's arranged in sort of concentric circular roads, almost like a map of a clock face. And there are different neighborhoods and sort of the camps kind of cluster around different themes and different parts of the city.

There is a post office, the BlackRock Public Library sets up public library with thousands of books on playa, and we do one year checkouts and we have a lot of quiet places to sit and read. And there are a lot of camps providing these calming spaces, which I think are also a really important part of many people's experiences.

The hub of Burning Man is center camp and that's a sort of central plaza for people to congregate around and major infrastructure is arranged around center camp. So there is Arctic where you can purchase ice to keep your coolers cool. there's a playa info, which is an actual information center. There's a volunteer hub, there's an arts hub. There are many camps that put on huge art pieces that you can climb all over. There are camps that offer workshops on anything from how to make mead to how to do shibari rope tying to how to communicate effectively with a partner.

Dave: There's also a temple. It's not dedicated to any one faith or even faith at all, but it is the type of spiritual anchor for the community, especially those who are grieving.

Molly Crockett: Standing at the temple and just feeling. The thickness of the air with emotion and devotion all around me. It reminded me a lot of the whaling wall in Jerusalem, I don't know if you've been there, but the same feeling, just like the air is penetrated by the really intense experiences of a lot of people both present and past.

And you can sort of see that and feel that and just the feelings of interacting with people there. That shakes you out of something.

Dave: Molly, speaking from experience besides being a scientist, she's also a burner, and when she first started going, she quickly realized this was way more

than a party in the desert. Something special, even revolutionary was happening there and she wanted to study it.

Molly Crockett: As someone who is focused on understanding altruism and pro-social behavior in my research. The practice of giving something with no expectations in return struck me as really beautiful and kind of radical.

Dave: Like many cities, Burning Man's Black Rock City has infrastructure, codes of conduct, a post office, and even neighborhoods. But there's one thing it doesn't have... money. See, Burning Man doesn't run on capitalism. It runs on giving, freely giving to others, something they call the gift economy, which was particularly exciting to Molly as a scientist.

Molly Crockett: I really wanted to experience what it's like to participate in a community that operates just purely on giving. There's no expectation of reciprocity. It's not a barter economy as many people misunderstand it to be.

Dave: So it's not the kind of give and take that we often have in normal life. But what types of things do people give or what counts, is it something you make? Is it money? Is it social support? Can it be anything?

Molly Crockett: It can take so many different forms. A lot of camps will offer food or a bar with drinks, massage, or healing services. I mentioned the library. We offer somewhere between 2000 and 3000 books every year. You can do one year checkout. That's pretty fun.

Dave: In most experiments on giving, researchers use money. But that wasn't gonna work here. So to see if people really were more generous, that Burning Man, Molly's team had to be creative.

Molly Crockett: We, of course, couldn't use money at Burning Man.

Dave: Did you use Ice?

Molly Crockett: We didn't. We gave people tickets that were exchangeable for items of value at the festival, including, you know, sunscreen, chapstick, little neck scarves, earplugs, because you can't buy anything out there.

Dave: In studies that use money to study generosity, we find that people usually make a 70/30 split in resources. For example, if we give people \$100 and tell them they could choose to share any amount of that with a stranger who's sitting

in the room next door, they might give \$30 and keep \$70 for themselves. So while they're not being totally selfish, they're clearly favoring themselves.

But at Burning Man, it was almost the opposite. Molly found that people gave away 62% of tickets that they could have. They're not just sharing equally, they're giving away more than they're keeping. And this is generosity toward total strangers.

That raises a bigger question, why? It's here that feelings of transformation come in, according to Molly, Burning Man, and similar festivals are changing people.

Molly Crockett: We find that about 62% of our sample report being at least somewhat transformed by the end of their stay. 20% are responding at the upper end, and those feelings of transformation are very pro-social in nature. They're characterized by feeling more socially connected to something larger than oneself and perceiving something new about other people.

Dave: You said that people report sometimes feeling this universal sense of connectedness and their moral circles that is who was worthy of my care expands.

Molly Crockett: Yes. So we did measure what we call moral expansion. So the gap between the generosity towards someone really close to you versus someone very far away, shrinks with every passing day that you spend at these events, and that process is mediated by transformative experience and feelings of connectedness with all of humanity.

Dave: This is a really important point decades of research and common sense makes it pretty clear that we're more likely to be generous and kind to people we care about, like a family member or friend. They're part of our inner moral circle. Their needs count more. But religions work to change that.

Almost every faith I can think of pushes us to care about everyone, to expand our moral circle, to love our neighbors as ourselves. And what Molly's work is showing is exactly that. Burning Man makes people more generous because it makes them feel more connected to complete strangers. Because it makes those strangers needs, their pain, morally intolerable.

But is that sustainable? Once you leave Burning Man and the unique, almost Utopian culture that exists there, does the kindness and generosity that's so much a part of it actually endure? One thing we know from science is that

continually giving to other people is difficult. Sure, we can be altruistic at times, but it usually doesn't last.

Selfishness will creep back in. Someone stops paying it forward to the next person in the toll booth or coffee line. Still, giving is a virtue. It builds the relationships that sustain us. And if we're able to change people to be more generous, society would be the better for it. So Molly wondered if Burning Man might be a way to do that. Could it transform and change people long-term? Can it, like many spiritual experiences, radically alter values, priorities, and outlooks in people's daily lives?

Molly Crockett: We do find in the weeks and months after the event that the degree to which you'd report having a transformative experience is positively correlated with generosity.

Dave: So, People are reporting having transformative experiences, which often relate to feeling greater connections and care for other people, expands who's in your moral circle, who you think is worthy. And that itself kind of predicts your generosity there and going forward.

But those transformative experiences where I'm feeling this greater sense of love and connection and I'm sure it varies. But maybe you can give us some sense of how much. Is it like I should care more about other people? Or is it something kind of more profound and and emotional?

Molly Crockett: So we did collect narratives about how people felt transformed. I think that a lot of them really do take the form of like experiencing feelings of care and compassion for strangers, both on the receiving end and the giving end, that feels really new. Like you understand in a deep experiential way as opposed to in theory kind of way, what it's like to feel that boundless compassion. And of course there are a lot of contemplative practices aimed towards cultivating this feeling, right?

Dave: Almost all spiritual practices in some way, when you have that truly spiritual or mystical experience, is this sense of deep connection, moral concern, and compassion that expands. Which is why I'm just so fascinated that it happens here... I shouldn't be.

Well, I practice meditation. And I have spent a lot of time sort of trying to cultivate this feeling in meditation practice. And one thing I often struggle with, and I think a lot of people struggle with is like, it's one thing to sort of have the intention to experience this expansive compassion and care for all of humanity.

But to have the feeling of it is different from thinking about it. And when you do have the feeling of it, it makes it easier to get back there because you sort of know what you're aiming for.

Dave: In one way, you can think of Burning Man as a ritual of sorts. That helps put the mind in a state where transformation is easier, kind of like a quicker route to a mystical experience, similar to the ways that people are using psychedelics these days. Which made me wonder, is it really the experience of Burning Man that's changing people? Or is it, well, the drugs they might be doing there?

Molly Crockett: Some people do go out there to party and dance and be in large crowds of people. But what we find is that, first of all, substance use is maybe not as widespread as you might think, especially when it comes to highly regulated substances. When it comes to how the transformation takes place, though, what we find in our data is that there's a kind of distinction in the qualities that people report of their transformative experience when they've used psychedelic substances versus not.

So the psychedelic substances in particular are associated with transformative experiences that are marked by perceiving something new about the nature of reality and the nature of the self. Whereas with the sort of non substance-related transformative experiences that people report at Burning Man and other events like that. It is more about feeling socially connected to others. And so there is overlap, of course. I think that the communal experience of participating in Burning Man is something that's this distinct from the types of transformations that people often report from psychedelic use.

Dave: So what are the ritual elements of Burning Man that might be changing people's views? Well, in one way, it shares a lot with rites of passage. There are difficult physical trials. You're in a hot desert. It's uncomfortable. You can feel your body's vulnerability to the elements. And to survive, people need to rely on each other. Some bring food, some bring ice, some will lend a hand when you need it most.

But it's also a place where you can leave your regular life behind. Some people take on different identities, wear different types of clothing, even use different names. It's a kind of liminal space, a world all its own, where usual expectations don't apply, and it's through that vulnerability, need for cooperation and ability to break free from the usual roles we inhabit, that a positive transformation can. Especially when this new place offers some guiding principles. And for Burning Man, there's 10 of them posted everywhere.

Molly Crockett: The very first principle that's listed is radical inclusion. Anyone can be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community, and I think that it's not trivial that that one is listed first. The others are in order. Gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, believing no trace, participation, and immediacy.

I think the radical inclusion is really important. Because the culture of the event is built on an expansive morality in contrast to some other types of gatherings, which are really more focused on we who believe in this particular religion, we who practice this particular practice.

You know, I speculate that what transformative experiences at mass gatherings do is reinforce individual commitments to the cultural norms of the group. And so when you have a group with a cultural norm of radical inclusion, this can be seen in the individual behaviors that we measured, including moral expansion and feelings of connectedness with all of humanity.

And also I think participating in the event as intended, so forming new relationships, dancing with other people, giving or receiving gifts. I think that if you went to Burning Man totally alone and didn't participate and just sort of camped by yourself and rode around and looked at art, but maybe didn't interact with other people, you would probably be less likely to be transformed in the way that we find as common pertaining to relationships with other people.

Dave: Participation is important. People need to take the experience seriously to benefit. Those who drop in at the end of the week for the big event, the social media influencers and the party focused, are less likely to experience a change.

What we find in our work is that it takes about three days for the transformative experiences to reach a plateau. There are people who are invested in participating in the culture who stay for the whole time, and there are people who come to see the spectacle, but not necessarily to participate. Those last three days, there's an influx of like a third of the city and the mood totally changes. Molly's point about participating, about giving and caring, sounds like what many religious communities aspire to. In fact, according to Reverend Alex Leach, it's exactly what church congregation should be.

Alex Leach: The church talks a lot about loving your neighbor as yourself on varying degrees, do Christians actually do that. But then I was in this community that is so post-Christian dumb and yet fiercely loving their neighbor as their selves. Cuz there are these 10 principles, right? That guide the whole

event, one of which is immediacy. Be here now. Don't be distracted by something else, somewhere else, be here now. And participation don't be a spectator, participate.

Dave: It wasn't like most churches where people say a few prayers and go on their merry. It was true community.

Alex Leach: Instead of, it's like 20% of the congregations doing 80% of the work. These theme camps, it's like everyone's pitching in, everyone's involved and they've figured out something their neighbors need, and they're offering that as a gift, as grace, to their neighbors. Without charging them, without trying to get them to join their camp, without trying to convince them that they're the best camp around. But to simply serve and help and contribute something. And I was like, oh, this is what congregations are supposed to be doing.

Dave: But it didn't start out that way for him long before he became an Episcopal priest. He was just an average guy who wanted to check out what was going on in the desert.

Alex Leach: I was an average religious person before I went. Meaning I went to church occasionally. I was working in politics and in political activism, and was dog grooming.

Dave: That first time at Burning Man was a spiritual awakening of sorts.

Alex Leach: I could just feel the saturation of God, like just how crammed full of godness the whole space was.

Dave: But it didn't lead him to leave the Christian faith that he knew. It actually made him want to reengage with it, renew it in some ways. And that led him down the path to becoming ordained as a priest.

Alex Leach: Burning man really broke open to me the whole idea of God incarnation. You're still immersed in the body at Burning Man. We talked about the harsh elements. Makes you very aware of your body. All the naked people make you very aware of the body and there's something about connecting to your breath and being still even in the midst of chaos.

You know, swirling art, cars that are blasting music and generators that never seem to turn off and bleak lights, and still finding that centered and quiet place in your body, was very profound for me in terms of God no longer being a static two-dimensional, you know, old white man with a long beard sitting on a throne

to being something that I know so intimately because it is closer to me than my very breath.

I felt a calling to be an ordained minister in the Episcopal Church. To help the church have more of Burning Man in it.

Dave: But Alex doesn't just want to bring more Burning Man to his church. He wants it to work both ways. So every year he runs a camp that brings Christianity to Burning Man too.

Alex Leach: So my camp is a religious af, so burning man according to their own census data, cause they have a census bureau that takes census data. 46% of the city identifies as spiritual but not religious. And so you get a lot of, you know, they're talking to me or someone and we're a priest and, and they say, well, I'm spiritual but not religious.

And so it's just a great joke to respond. Oh well I'm religious af. And people laugh and they smile and then that starts an interaction, right? That that starts an engagement. It also signals to people that yes, we're religious, right? Puts that right out there. We are religious people, but we're not the religious people who won't curse, right?

Which we're not stuffy. Are we authentic? Are we here to just proselytize and convert a bunch of people, or are we authentically gonna be burners right alongside everyone else?

Dave: The people who are, who are spiritual but not religious, what do you think they mean by that? What are they looking for in spirituality?

Alex Leach: I think there's a great search for meaning and purpose and what am I here to do and what gives my life? Meaning what? What's gonna get me up in the morning and keep me going? And I think we live in a very chaotic and painful society. And so finding what's gonna give me centeredness and peace and grounding and community. A place where there is something bigger than themselves that can hold them and hold their pain and hold their life experience.

Dave: When people first see a Christian camp, is there any kind of ill will or suspicion toward it or what are the feelings there?

Alex Leach: So we construct a 16 foot geodesic dome that we've adorned with various iconography and religious imagery. So not trying to hide our Christianity, but also not Jesus nailed on a cross.

There are definitely people who feel some suspicion, some ill will, some hardship. Two things that I think help with that. One is one of the principles is De-commodification, right? Of Burning Man and so it is so joyful for me to practice my Christianity in a de-commodified way. We're just there to do ritual and to talk about Jesus. I'm not trying to sell you Jesus. I'm just gonna talk about it and you can participate or not.

Alex Leach: And then the second thing is that we do have this intentional time available in the afternoon where people can come and test us out. They can share their trauma stories. They can share their wounds, and we have to sort of prove ourselves.

Because again, we're trying to do this experiment of making Christian ritual accessible to spiritual but not religious and to burners.

Crowd: You repeat after me. Be still and know that I am God. Still know that I am God. Be still.

Dave: Remember the temple, the spiritual and physical center of the city that Molly talked about? Well, even though it's not a formal religious space, Alex figured why not minister to anyone interested there too ?

Crowd: This is the practice of anointing with ashes.

Alex Leach: We go out to the temple and we offer Eucharist services and I like to particularly lead a, a kind of Ash Wednesday service out there where we use ashes from last year's man and temple burns and anoint people with the traditional words.

Remember that you are dust and to dust, you shall return. Which takes on such a depth of meaning when you are covered in dust from this dried lakebed.

Dave: When you are covered in dust and also when you're, especially, I mean, people can have grief for many reasons, but if the grief that you're thinking about is the loss of loved ones. I mean the contemplation of death is one of the rituals that I think shocks people the most out of our normal routines, and points us toward what is meaningful.

Crowd: Reminders of how all of this, this whole city is temporary. In this life, in this city, in our relationships. And so I'll begin by blessing.

Dave: You realize your vulnerability, you realize your dependence on other people. You realize you are empowered to make a difference and help them. And at the same time, there's a reminder of your own mortality, which itself we know pushes toward connection. And so it just seems to me like a beautiful symphony of pieces coming together to transform people.

Crowd: And help us to remember that we are called to walk in light and love. Amen.

Dave: Do you see people have powerful reactions? What have you, experie?

Alex Leach: Yeah, just this last burn, I'm giving someone communion and I see the tears rolling down their cheek as they put a little husk of bread in their hands and call it the body of Christ and offer them some wine. And when I talk to them afterwards, this particular person was someone who hasn't been to church in 30, 40 years. Because the last time they were in church, they were called an outsider, called a sinner, called lost, whatever the words were. And yet here was a place where they could feel at home and found and held and a belonging, and that they were invited to the table.

Dave: You're not just a passive observer, right? You are, you are experiencing the phenomenon yourself, right? So like when we look at rites of passage in more traditional cultures, indigenous cultures, there's often this sense of it's difficult, it hurts. There is some threat, some effort. You enter this kind of liminal space where your normal roles are deconstructed so that you can kind of reconstruct and in some sense, that's what Burning Man is.

How do we do that? You said I went there and I experienced, I felt God. I think for a lot of people that's what's missing in modern religion, right? That how do we do that?

Alex Leach: Out there at the desert, you are pushed to your limit and you recognize that even in that place you have the capacity to help another person. That's powerful and transformative. So how do we do that in default world, in churches? I think it involves being really intentional and it involves inviting people perhaps to spaces that are not Sunday morning.

So one of the things that I think we could offer is space for people to create. I think people innately want to create, they want to make something and they want to give themselves to something, something that they are passionate about and something they see serves a purpose. And I think increasingly they don't see

the church, for example, as a space where they can do that because there's not room.

The people who come to our camp, who are Christians, who are closeted at their normal camps. So they've been coming to Burning Man for years. They camp with whoever they camp with. , but they're secretly Christians in their default life. They go to church and then they find us and they're like, oh my God, I could be honest about who I am and be here. And they're like, oh, I wish I could find a church back home that was like this camp, right? I mean, they're already insiders, they're already churchgoers, right? But they, they're like, oh, this is what I want my church to be like. This is what I need.

Dave: That was the case for Kyle Bennett, a minister from Mississippi.

Kyle Bennett: We probably have a more playful spirit with my ministry, although it's always been pretty playful. It rejuvenated after being it's 23 years in, it was a shot in the arm spiritually when I needed it.

Dave: And it's not just Kyle. Patty Jenkins, a hospital chaplain, felt that rejuvenation too.

Patty Jenkins: I don't know that it's changed my spiritual beliefs. I would say that it's affirmed them where it made me put depth to them where I know that God is alive in people's lives in so many different ways.

Dave: And then there's John Brett, a chaplain who organized the San Francisco Night Ministry's first faithful and fabulous Drag Street Eucharist, which involved a Jesus puppet on a communion table and lots of glitter. And who describes his favorite ministry experience to date as offering spiritual care while in drag, at a taco truck. For him, Burning Man provided that space to reconnect with the religion he felt had ostracized him and reimagine that religion in a more inclusive way.

John Brett: I feel that I have been converted back to the place where I want to be. As someone who has felt themselves as a marginalized member of Christian community, I feel possibility here. I feel the possibility of conversion of the church, to be more of what the church says that it is and or wants to be. Burning Man has given me a trust that in these sorts of spaces, liminal spaces, we can find ways to evolve both practically and theologically.

I could be an ordained pastor one day and the only pastor here. . So central does this place now seem to my sense of vocation. And it would be enough. I see

Burning Man as a contemporary pilgrimage site. People from around the world arriving, like we say, arriving home, welcome home.

Dave: One thing, data from across the globe tells us is that the doing of religion matters as much or even more than the believing in it. It's through participating in rituals that communities are built and minds are changed. And when it comes to Burning Man, Many people leave more kind, generous, and connected than when they came, they found a community, a congregation, spiritual or secular. And from that base of strength, that home, they're renewed.

Molly Crockett: I think that what transformative experiences can do, is that they open up a pathway for you to tell a new story about yourself, both as an individual and collectively. We know that, you know, human nature is tribal and there's certainly a lot of evidence for that. And we have so much potential to transcend that, and part of realizing that potential is coming together collectively to co-create a new story about who we are.

Dave: We're always the author of our own narrative. Every day we write another chapter in the story of ourselves, but too often we can be on autopilot too often. The next chapter seems to follow directly, almost repeat what came before, and that's one reason why experiences like Burning Man can be so powerful.

They shake us out of our routine. They open our eyes not only to what could be, but for a few days under a hot sun in a place that seems topsy-turvy, also allow us to try on a different role, one that lets us feel not only our own vulnerability, but our power to help others. To experience being part of a caring congregation in the truest sense of the word, whether that leads you to feel God or just the love of your fellow human is up to you.

But if Molly's science and Alex's testimony tells us one thing, it will change you and for the better.