

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

Brian McLaren

Jacqui Lewis

with Richard Rohr

3: Seeing Is Political

Brian McLaren: I live in Southwest Florida, just about two miles from the Gulf of Mexico, and I'm surrounded by the 10,000 islands and the Everglades. I live in one of the best places on the whole planet for kayaking, and I love to kayak. A couple of weeks ago, Sunday afternoon, I loaded my kayak up on the back of my car and drove to a nearby marina, and I put my kayak in. I had to just drive around the marina and then paddle through one pass, and then I would be in wilderness. I was looking forward to it. It's a beautiful, quiet place. Just one problem: When I put my kayak in the water and started paddling around the marina toward that pass, I looked at all the boats moored in the marina, a lot of big yachts. Some very wealthy people store their boat there, and then some smaller motorboats.

It turns out there had been this big flotilla, political flotilla, to show support for President Trump. And so, a whole bunch of these boats had big, big flags "Make America Great Again," some slogans I won't repeat, but all political flags supporting our current president. And it just bothered me. It's funny. I paddled past, went through that pass around a couple islands, got way back in the wilderness, and I still was just fuming. It just bothered me, something in me, it was just like fingernails on chalkboard. It just bugged me. I was surrounded. You know, dolphins swam by, manatees swam by, egrets, pelicans, herons. And that's when it hit me. People are like egrets, and pelicans, and herons, and dolphins. They flock together. We human beings form flocks and schools around people who share our perspectives, which means share our biases. We bring our biases together. [music]

You might say we compound our biases in groups. We bring our individual confirmation biases. We find other people who share them. Then we form these mass confirmation bias communities. We bring our complexity biases. There are certain simplicities we don't want anybody to question or complexify. We find other people who share that desire for simplicity. We flock with them. We form a community and anyone outside our community who criticizes us, or disagrees with us, or argues with us, it bothers us, and we want to keep away from them and keep them out of our community. We don't want them disrupting or disturbing the peace. And we find over time, it's just easiest to flock with people to form our own flotilla of people who see things the same way.

I've been involved in politics a good bit over the last twelve years or so, especially. I've been actively involved in several presidential campaigns, as well as senate and other congressional campaigns, and state campaigns as well. In fact, this past year, I've spent a good bit of time training candidates in how to better communicate and more ethically communicate, especially with religious voters, and I've delved in pretty deeply to research on how bias affects political alignment and how political alignment affects bias. And I watched my reaction to those flags at the marina, and I realized this applies to everybody. It's not just a problem for the other guy. It's a problem for all of us.

Welcome, everyone, to Learning How to See. Our topic today is "Seeing is Political," and we're going to talk about how bias, how filters and distortions to our thinking lead us to see the world very differently; lead us to see the world in opposition to one another; lead us to support candidates who lie to us, who abuse us, who harm us. We're going to go right there to things that are highly relevant to where we are living today. And let me start by welcoming Jacqui Lewis and Richard Rohr. I'm so glad to be with you again, and I wonder if each of you could just check in on how do you think we're doing as a nation politically? How do you analyze 2020 so far in our political activities? Richard, what comes to your mind? What

do you see?

Richard Rohr: You know, this might be because I just talked to the team that's going to create the DM's, the Daily Meditations, for this coming year. I quoted for them Hannah Arendt's term about the Nazis, "the banality of evil," how we think of evil as something grotesque, exceptional, and the whole Nazi experience was it had become commonplace. Everybody's doing it. I think we've got to clarify this this year because we have just seen this happen in our country, the banality of evil, roundly agreed upon as not evil. Educated people seemingly enjoying, or allowing, or appreciating being lied to on a daily basis. What does that say about our humanity? It seems to me, it's a low point in civilization and that's not much of an exaggeration, you know?

Brian McLaren: Yeah. And to have a low point when we have nuclear weapons, plus the ability to destroy our climate and environment, it's a bad time to have a low point, isn't it? [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Yes. It's a good way to say it.

Brian McLaren: Jacqui, what are you seeing, Jacqui?

Jacqui Lewis: Thanks, Brian. It's so good to be with you and Richard again today. I was listening to a podcast today where Krista Tippett interviewed our friend angel Kyodo Williams.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: I was listening to angel observe that this is a different difference, that this time is a different kind of difference. And I think that's right. I mean, Ruby Sales and I talk a lot, like, she says, when people say we've never been here before, if people say we've never been here before, well, that's not true. We've been here before—racism, violence, lying, right, Southern strategy. I mean, we can think of other episodes in our history, Nazism, where we've been here before. But I think I nuance what angel's saying. This is a different kind of here though in the way that we accept lying as a part of our national discourse, that we elected a narcissist who's a sociopath.

And we knew we were doing it when we did it. And we rolled the dice on it, that somehow it would be a little bit better than the other option. Holy cow, when I really think about it, I'm heartbroken and I'm so counting on good people of goodwill, not about political party, but for good people of goodwill to say, "Actually, we're not going to do lying. We're actually not going to do grabbing of genitals. We're actually not going to do sociopathy. We're actually not going to do narcissism. We're just not going to do it." That is my prayer.

Brian McLaren: Boy, you put that together, how horrible, how dangerous the moment is with, Richard, your comment about the banality of evil. I just came across a quote I'd never seen before from C. S. Lewis the other day where C. S. Lewis said something like, "The greatest evils are perpetrated by men in suits and ties—"

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes.

Brian McLaren: --where things are moved, seconded, and voted on in air-conditioned offices," and all the rest. And we just realize this is the time to wake up. And I'll tell you it's really what got me

thinking about these biases.

I just want to do a quick review of the biases that we have covered so far in our first couple episodes. We talked about confirmation bias that the human brain welcomes information that confirms what it already thinks and resists information that disturbs or contradicts what it already thinks. That's really the basis for so many others. It's just the way our brains are wired. Second, complexity bias, that the human brain prefers a simple lie to a complex truth. Third, community bias, that the brain finds it hard to see something that our communities don't want us to see, that our belonging groups don't want us to see. We're so geared toward being part of our team, part of our tribe, part of our group, part of our flock, that if an idea comes to our mind that will put us out of sync with our group, we're so terrified by that thought that our brain dismisses it often before we're even conscious of it. And then comes contact bias, which is sort of the flip side. If we don't have regular contact with certain people, then we can't see what they see. We don't believe what they say. In a sense, they don't exist for us if we don't have a relationship of real contact with them.

I think of what our mutual friend, Shane Claiborne, often says, "It's not that the rich hate the poor, it's that the rich don't even know the poor," that there's no relationship there. And that brings us to some highly political biases. And the first one I'm calling conservative/liberal bias. And basically, the idea here is that our brains like to see as our party sees, and we flock with those who see as we do.

There have been a couple of theorists who've helped me understand this. One is George Lakoff, and George Lakoff says that people who identify as liberal tend to see the world through a nurturing parent window. They basically say people are basically good. They want to do the right thing, but they just haven't been taught. They haven't been instructed. They haven't been guided. They don't have the encouragement. And if they could just get that kind of encouragement, they would do the right thing. And then he says conservatives see the world through a strict father window. People are basically bad. They want to get away with murder. And unless there's a strict father looking over their shoulder to stop them, they're going to be as bad as they can possibly be. So, that's George Lakoff. And George Lakoff says that people who are moderates, it just means that they flip back and forth between the nurturing parent and the strict father mode. And I think that there's an awful lot of power in that.

And then one other theorist who has something to say about this bias is Jonathan Haidt and what are called the Moral Foundations theorists. And they've done a good bit of research on this, and they find that people who identify as liberal or progressive are especially persuaded by arguments based on justice and compassion. If something is fair and something is kind, they're drawn toward it. And conservatives also value fair and kind, but there are four other lines of moral reasoning that they're super attracted to—purity, loyalty, authority, and tradition. And so, if they can be shown that something seems degrading or dirty as opposed to pure, that really riles them up. If they feel that something is disloyal to their team, or group, or religion, that is enough to make them want to reject it. If it goes against the authority figures that they trust and respect, and if it violates tradition, they resist it.

And when I read Moral Foundations Theory, I remember thinking, I think I as a progressive am suspicious of purity, loyalty, authority, and tradition because I see them used against justice and compassion so often. But let's just start there with conservative/liberal bias. As you hear that, Jacqui, let me go to you first. As a person with both theological and psychological training, what hits you about that?

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you, Brian. I remember reading Lakoff's book, *Don't Call Me an Elephant*. Am I quoting that title right?

Brian McLaren: *Don't Think of an Elephant*.

Jacqui Lewis: *Don't Think of an Elephant*, yeah. And thinking about the truth of what he was saying and also hearing it gendered. I hear the nurturing piece as kind of traditionally thought of as feminine and, of course, a dad is masculine. And I'm really fascinated by, well, first of all, I'm his age and his location makes sense to me, but it doesn't mean that that's not true. Like, there's something true about the way that, like archetype, right? You might say there's some archetypal things that feel to us feminine, nurturing. The word womb in the Hebrew and in the Aramaic is almost exactly the same root for the word mercy. So, there's something like wired into, I think, the way humans develop. They expect a certain kind of mothering and a certain kind of fathering. And I think we don't really shake that, Brian and Richard, I don't think we shake it.

Brian McLaren: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: What I would hope for is a way to shake it up. And I think maybe some of what our queer friends are giving us, the queer world of the nonbinary kind of conversations that happen, that make us think, "Oh, well, that animus can be male and female. Right? The anima can be male and female. And I think I find some hope in that.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yeah, that makes sense. And, of course, that strict father plays into all the narratives of patriarchy throughout our history.

Jacqui Lewis: All of it. All of it.

Brian McLaren: Richard, you've done so much thinking about toxic masculinity. I'm sure you have lots of thoughts about this.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Where do I start? I mean, certainly just this, what you just said is so confirmed in my own experience. I've observed people for fifty years. Why can two people, equally educated, come down with such different conclusions? It does seem to me that there's those who prefer, purity's a good word. And, you know, if it's true that what you learn in your first six years at the feet of your mother or father is somehow stored in the lizard brain, that it isn't highly subject to rational thinking.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: It feels like the voice of God. I've seen that in myself as I've grown. And there are so many jokes today about you're becoming like your mother, you're becoming like

your father. Well, that's undoubtedly true. If you don't have an independent source of truth, which we would call the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or some kind of contemplative seeing, which is the theme of this whole thing, I think you take those early voices as the voices of God, and they're very hard to overcome. If your parents were authoritarian, that still seems like goodness to you. To be authoritarian, to honor authoritarian voices, and people who don't are dangerous. I can see why things like spiritual direction grew, but I think this is the job of a good spiritual director who can say gently back to you, "You do know that what you're saying is not rational."

Jacqui Lewis: Can I join in there for a second with Richard?

Richard Rohr: Please, jump in. I've said enough.

Jacqui Lewis: No, you haven't. You're just sparking my imagination, Richard, that this idea of those first six years of our life and how that feels like the voice of God, actually the conversations about God image, right? Ana-Maria Rizutto, one of your Catholic colleagues, wrote this book called *The Birth of the Living God*, and the stuff of God, the way we think of the voice of God, and the behavior of God, and the will of God is really shaped by those childhood experiences you're describing. The feeling of whether or not we were lifted up and we felt we could understand what it meant to have an idealized other, images on the stained-glass windows in our churches. What did our first church school teachers teach? What did our first sermon sound like? So, all along our life cycle, there's this opportunity for us to shake up God, but we often don't, Richard, because no one challenges us to, no one says—

Richard Rohr: No one challenges you.

Jacqui Lewis: No one says, "God's not like that," right?

Richard Rohr: Because we live with our like-minded group.

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly. Exactly. So, God is punitive, angry, rulemaking, demanding our loyalty and tradition, God number one, right? God number two is a nurturing mother hen, you know, merciful other who'll walk alongside you as you discover your life. Not so much about yes/no, but more about both/and. I just think what you're saying is really true about God and politics, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Ditto. Ditto.

Brian McLaren: And I don't know about you two, but as soon as I read *Moral Foundations Theory*, I just started seeing the Gospels, different passages flash in front of my eyes. In all of the Scriptures, like purity, isn't it interesting Jesus says it isn't what goes into a person that defiles a person. So, he doesn't say purity's unimportant. He flips it. It's what comes out. It's greed and lust and anger. In other words, he doesn't throw out purity, he just flips it so that that kind of purity will reinforce justice and compassion.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Brian McLaren: And you think of loyalty, "You have heard it said, but I say..." So, he's willing to challenge authority, but then he says, "But I'm not overthrowing the law of the prophets, I'm fulfilling

its intent,” you know? I mean, you just see Jesus playing with purity, loyalty, authority, tradition. It’s a fine tradition you have, he says, “but you end up treating your parents like dirt in the name of your tradition. I’m paraphrasing, but just fascinating to watch Jesus grapple with that. And, of course, I also think, Jacqui, just Jesus calling God “Father,” but then using the image of a mother hen gathering her chicks.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. Right.

Brian McLaren: Or Jesus modeling not that kind of patriarchal, authoritarian style, but modeling servanthood, and all the rest. Richard, you, I think you’re the person who I’ve, the only person I’ve heard say this, that something to the effect of, of course God would incarnate as a man because it’s a man who-- Could you get at that saying?

Richard Rohr: Because someone had to model doing the male thing right.

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, that’s so good.

Richard Rohr: And Jesus is, by no criteria, a classic patriarchal male, so much so that a lot of people are a little embarrassed by this sweet Jesus who is so forgiving, and accepting, and including, we can’t make him into a patriarch. You just can’t.

Jacqui Lewis: He’s not macho. He’s not macho.

Richard Rohr: No, he’s not macho. There you go.

Brian McLaren: Let’s step back and realize then that if people, because of early childhood experiences, the way their parents raised them, this helps me have compassion on people, not to excuse the danger it causes, but to have compassion, to think I grew up with parents who treated me well. My dad, especially when I was young, he had a temper, but he managed that as he got older. But even when I was a child if he lost his temper, he would come apologize to me. He would ask me to forgive him, you know? And so, as a result, when I see an authoritarian leader, blustering and refusing to admit he’s wrong, it disgusts me. It just disgusts me. But I realize there must be people who, when they see that authoritarian leader lying and blustering, that makes them feel safe, somehow.

Richard Rohr: It must. It must. That’s the only way I can make sense of it. Yeah. It’s pre-rational—

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes. So that’s conservative/liberal bias, and it would suggest that people kind of flock to other people who see the world in this way.

Let me move on to the next one, which is consciousness bias. And the idea here is that a person’s level of consciousness or their cognitive development makes seeing some things possible and other things impossible. Our brains see from a location.

Just a quick anecdote. I was speaking about this once and during the break, someone came up to me and pulled out their iPhone and said, “I’m a scuba diver, and I want to show you a picture I took on a recent dive at sixty feet,” whatever it was. And he shows me, it’s a picture of a sea anemone and it was kind of grayish color. And then he said, “Then I turned on a light and this is the picture I took with an external light source.” And this sea anemone was

pink, and orange, and aqua blue, and just a beautiful set of colors. And he said, “I just, when you were talking today,” he said, “I just thought of that experience I had that depending on how deep you are, you see different amounts of light.” And I think that’s what consciousness bias is about. Richard, you’ve done so much with this. Maybe you could just give us some ideas.

Richard Rohr: I haven’t done so much with it, I’ve just learned a lot from people wiser than I. And, you know, the last century has produced a whole bunch of what we call in general, developmental psychologists, developmental theory. And what later teachers have done in the last twenty years, largely, twenty-five, is put all these theories—Piaget, Fowler, Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Ken Wilber—put them all together, side by side, and recognize, you know, there’s a lot of similarity. There’s a direction to maturity. There’s a direction to what it means to grow up. You become less dualistic, I have to use the word, less binary in your thinking. You become, therefore, less violent. You become more able to include as you move to the higher levels of consciousness. In fact, what we call love, certainly agape love, is not even possible in the lower levels.

I always say we’ve preached the gospel to many people who, with all the good intention in the world, really were incapable of love because they solve all problems by power and domination and utilitarian enforcement. If you really think that’s the way you achieve your purpose, it’s pretty hard to understand love.

I’ve been amazed in TV commentary in the last year how much the word transactional is being used. I thought I was using it quite originally and, you know, transformation instead of transaction, but I must have learned it from somebody. I’m sure I did because so many people are saying it, that transaction is not the same as transformation.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: And I think we can apply transaction to this. The lower levels of consciousness, they’re transactional. Let me pick on the Catholic Church for a minute, and then I’ll stop. But we were raised with this understanding of the seven Sacraments. That held the Church together, and the typical Catholic, not knowing it, was given a largely transactional notion of salvation. Just check Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, First Penance, married in a Catholic church—check, check, check, check—you’re going to heaven. That’s not an exaggeration. And we didn’t really expect transformation. It wasn’t our fault. But here’s maybe the most important point: Everybody was there together, so none of us could see it.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: I’m not picking on anybody. We were all transactional in the 1950s. Now you’re all too young to remember that, but I don’t think there were many transformational people around. [laughter] If they were around, none of us read them or understood them. So, there has been an evolution of consciousness, without any doubt, in our own lifetime. And we can talk this way and have people stay with us. It’s amazing.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes. It is. It is amazing. Jacqui, I’d love to hear what you’re thinking.

Jacqui Lewis: I just thought Richard preached the gospel right there. We weren't ready for a conversation on transformation. And I think it's interesting that I'll bet you that not only the social scientists and psychologists that you mentioned, Richard, and not only theologians, but I'll bet you all of the systems in the '50s felt that way. That this is a magic formula for raising boys and girls. This is a magic formula for being white in America. You know, this is a magic formula for success, that there was a transactional understanding of what it meant to be a human. Did it come out of the war? Did it come out of prosperity in the '50s? I'm not sure because I never thought about it before, but it makes sense to me that the systems, plural, would be wired in the same way and that we're rewiring the systems now. So, we think about the political movements of the '60s as rewiring that transactional nature of the way to be a human to more of a transformed way of understanding systems and structures.

Brian McLaren: Yes. And even the idea that there's more than one way to see—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brian McLaren: --it's just such a contradiction to the old Enlightenment idea that reasonable men will agree, you know, that was the great motto of the Enlightenment, that everybody will see things the same way if they're just reasonable.

Jacqui Lewis: And then, right, the reaction to that, the way systems don't like to change is that there has been now a reconstructed sense of either/or binary thinking, right, not nuanced, not more than one path, just straight, left and right—

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: --so we feel safe again from all of the post-Enlightenment too many choices.

Brian McLaren: Yes. You know, as soon as you say that, Jacqui, it makes me think that if we are experiencing some evolution of consciousness, if the center of gravity is shifting toward more mature cognitive abilities, every four years we throw everybody back into a dualistic fight, and we oversimplify. And it may be that for us to actually move beyond where we are now, we're going to have to change the discourse of our politics, the processes of our politics, it's going to require system-wide change. But right now we are really stuck. And when you take conservative/liberal bias, and when you take consciousness bias, you realize why we get stuck. And you realize that for there to be change, I'm not saying this to flatter anybody, but it requires pastors like Jacqui Lewis preaching in New York City. And it requires teachers like Richard Rohr, and it requires conversations like we're having now to help people even understand that there are multiple ways to see. And that we have some choice in these matters.

Richard Rohr: You know, and I think a lot of us have seen is this binary thinking soon becomes zero-sum thinking, win/lose, as if the truth is to win. That's truth. And that's where America is today, at least a lot of America. It's all about winning. And if you win, you must have the truth. It's a very unfortunate connection. If it's either/or then it's all or nothing.

Jacqui Lewis: That's correct. I'm really interested, Richard, I think that's so right. And I'm interested in these Lincoln Project Republicans. I hope it's just okay to say that out loud. I'm really curious about what is it that makes these folks stand apart from the flock? In other words,

developmentally, psychologically, ethically, how can we study what makes them stand apart from the flock and how can we help more people stand apart from rigid thinking, stand apart from binary thinking, how do we do that?

Brian McLaren: You know, Jacqui, when you say that, I think isn't it interesting that Jesus shows up speaking in parables? And parables are stories. So, he takes us out of black-and-white thinking and puts us in a story. And very often his stories have ethical dilemmas or even crazy absurdities to shake us out of that simplistic, binary thinking.

Jacqui Lewis: That's good, Brian.

Brian McLaren: It's sort of interesting, isn't it? If it's not for preachers, and artists, and filmmakers, and poets—

Jacqui Lewis: And musicians, Brian.

Brian McLaren: --and musicians, and dancers, and others who take us to other places, if only the politicians have us with their words, then we're really in trouble. And so, that's conservative/liberal bias, that's consciousness bias.

I want to mention one more. We just have a couple of minutes, but this is a kind of fun one to end on. It's called competency bias. And people in the field of education would know it as the Dunning-Kruger hypothesis. It's been studied and proven in a lot of different cases. Here's my simple way of summarizing it: We are incompetent at knowing how incompetent or competent we are. [laughter] Our brains prefer to think of ourselves as slightly above average. And what that means is people who are incompetent think, "Well, nobody else is much more competent than I am. I'm probably above average," which means they always underestimate their incompetence.

And the flip side of it is that sometimes people are very competent. They don't realize how much more they know than some other people know. And so, they underestimate their competence. But, boy, in the world of politics, we see certain figures who claim to know more than the generals and know more than the healthcare experts. And we watch how dangerous it is when people are not aware of their competency bias. And it just makes me think of all kinds of things, once again, in the Gospels where Jesus says, "You blind leaders of the blind, you have no idea how much you don't see." Oh, my.

Richard Rohr: That's today's Gospel. You're right on target.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: There is this feeling I have on the edge of my consciousness, not a fully formed thought, but we can kind of hypothesize about why people want a mean daddy. Right? I want a mean daddy to make me feel safe. That's my mean daddy. He can beat up your mean daddy. He's a liar, and he's a thief, but he's stronger than yours. We can kind of see that. I can't fully see what's in it for the populace, if you will, to feel like our leaders are not competent, not smart, not bright. I can't make a link to why you follow a person that isn't bright, right, that you know isn't smart? I can't really figure that one out. Do you guys know?

Richard Rohr: I wish I did. [laughter]

Brian McLaren: My gosh, Jacqui, you just say it, and you realize, I mean, if you went into a brain surgery and the brain surgeon didn't know what he was doing but was very confident and you realize this is, every time we have an election, the issue of com[petence], we don't have to doubt that a person who wants to run for an office has a high opinion of their own competence. [laughter]

Jacqui Lewis. Correct. That's right.

Brian McLaren: That's why we have to actually test and evaluate. Well, I think we can see how this matter of learning how to see is important for so many reasons, but it is super important in our political lives. [music]

Richard Rohr: Yep.

Brian McLaren: And we need people who will help other people learn how to see.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen.

Yvette Trujillo: Learning How to See was adapted from Brian's eBook, *Why Don't They Get It?* available at brianmclaren.net. Brian McLaren, Jacqui Lewis, and Richard Rohr have been your hosts for this conversation. Other members of the team that helped make this possible were Corey Pigg, Paul Swanson, Izzy Spitz, Sarah Palmer, Jenna Keiper, Nicholas Kramer, Lisa Powell, and I'm Yvette Trujillo. This podcast was produced by the Center for Action and Contemplation, which is located in the heart of New Mexico, thanks to the generosity of our supporters. We also have other podcasts you might like. You can find those wherever you like to listen by searching for Center for Action and Contemplation or visit us at cac.org to find out more. From the high desert of New Mexico, we wish you peace and every good. [music ends]