

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

Brian McLaren

Jacqui Lewis

with Richard Rohr

4: What Authoritarian Leaders See

Brian McLaren: She came to the Christian fellowship group that I helped lead. After the meeting, she told me she had leukemia and had only six months to live. I believed her. Why would anybody lie about something like that? In the coming months, she would come to fellowship meetings with her leg in a brace. She said she had a bone marrow aspiration from her femur. She would miss a meeting and tell me she was in the hospital. I would ask to come visit her, and she would tell me that I couldn't come because her chemotherapy made her immunocompromised. This went on for months. I noticed a pattern. Every time I tried to visit her in the hospital, something would come up at the very last minute. Eventually, little by little, other details stopped fitting together. The whole story started to fall apart. I realized that this poor young woman was so desperate for a certain kind of attention that she'd concocted this whole story as a way to elicit compassion under terms that she could control. And I was taken in, and many of my friends were taken in as well.

Now, she carried on a kind of deception with us, but we all know there are other con artists out there who are far more dangerous. They swindle people out of their whole life savings. They create Ponzi schemes that destroy hundreds of lives. They create economic crashes that make them millions of dollars but plunge whole economies into recessions and depressions. Con artists win elections. They start wars, and lose wars, and people die. Sometimes they become megachurch pastors or priests in a country parish. Sometimes they become cult leaders and people drink their Kool-Aid. One way or another, con artists earn the adoration and worship of millions. Sometimes they make a lot of money. Sometimes they drive other benefits from their cons.

But I'm not just interested in what's going on in the minds of con artists. I'm interested in what went on in my mind when this woman told me she had leukemia and had a few months to live. Something in me was attracted to the story she was telling. It offered me a chance to be a kind and gracious hero. It offered me the chance for something that I think I need to understand because if I don't understand it, I could be vulnerable the next time a con artist comes along.

When a person approaches us with a story that appeals to us and they tell that story with such confidence, many of us are tempted to give the keys to our brains to these people. We give them a key so that they gain access to some deep part of us. We like the way we feel when we're under the nearly hypnotic influence of these people. Sometimes I think it's like a blood transfusion of confidence—that other person has so much confidence and maybe if I yield myself to it, it will transfuse into me. So, certain con artists have the ability to get us to sign a contract where we let them do our thinking for us. Con artists know something. They see something many of us don't see about ourselves. That's what we'll be exploring today.
[music ends]

Welcome to Learning How to See, everyone. As always, I'm so happy to be with the wonderful Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis and my dear friend and colleague, Fr. Richard Rohr. And we're talking about biases, and we're talking about glitches or malfunctions in our seeing program. And we're talking about how to be liberated to try to see reality a little more clearly. And we have talked about a number of these biases already. We talked about confirmation and complexity bias in Episode 1; community, complementarity, and contact bias in Episode 2. In our last episode, we talked about political biases, conservative/liberal bias, consciousness bias, and competency bias, and we have two more today that are highly

relevant to our political moment. In fact, our title for this episode is “What Con Artists and Authoritarian Leaders See.” And I wonder, Jacqui, have you ever had any experience with a con artist?

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. Sadly. [laughter] Good to be with you, Brian and Richard. I’m so grateful for this collegiality and conversation. Yeah. I mean, I think these are two short stories that go around the same access. One was when I was a little girl, we first moved to Chicago. We had been in those like nondescript, boring Air Force base churches, you know, but suddenly we were in Chicago at the New Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, and the music was off the chain, and all the old Black ladies with their doilies on would get the Holy Spirit like, “Wool!” I was like, “Oh man, this is my jam. I want this kind of energy.” And so, I was like, “Wow, this is amazing, amazing, amazing!” But even as a little person like, I think I was eight, I caught wind of a feeling that the money collecting was not straightforward.

So, you’d walk up and put your money in the plate. And then there would be another time when the people were tithing would walk and put their money in the plate. Then the third thing would be the deacons’ offering, and you’d go up there and put your money in the plate. And the fourth one was always the pastor’s support fund. And I was like, the pastor support fund? I’m little, like, I’m putting my little piggy bank money in and Mrs. Pastor, his wife, always had on some kind of new fur coat, always had on some kind of new fur hat. They had these big cars, and I was like, “Wait, wait, wait, wait. Mom and dad don’t have fur coats that big.” So, that was like a little [inaudible 7:45] about a con. And my mom, we went to Presbyterian churches, and then at some point my mom started going to a Baptist church again in Chicago, and almost the same thing. She called me one day and said, Jacqui talk to me about the seed offering. The seed offering? She was like, “Yeah, the pastor, we had a visiting pastor. He said if we put a seed offering in, it would cure my cancer.” Brian. Richard.

Brian McLaren: Mm. Mm. Mm.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Cure my cancer. So, my mom, vulnerable, sick growing up in this Baptist Tradition, really believed that she could make a kind of offering that would make God hear her prayers. That is a con, everyone. Sorry.

Brian McLaren: Oh, my gosh.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Richard, I’m imagining you’ve seen a good bit of this in different circles.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, I’m afraid so. Now, before I say it, I don’t want anybody to think that I do not believe in the possibility of miracles, and I do not believe in the possibility of apparitions. God can do anything God wants, but before Vatican II, we Catholics grew up on a whole menu of apparitions and miracles more than the Gospels. You Protestants were not wrong when you criticized us for that. And when the priest, from the pulpit, would wax eloquent about Mary appearing on a bush, and Jesus appearing, his face on a tortilla. [laughter] She said, “Oh, my God, isn’t that beautiful? I need to go and see that tortilla.” [laughter] Oh, they’re not doing us any favor, you know?

It's interesting though, already, again, as a young seminarian, still pre-rational in my Catholic thinking, I knew there was something suspicious about it because we did make jokes. We did make jokes, but I still wouldn't joke in front of maybe priests or professors because I felt it was required to believe that what Christianity is all about is miraculous things happening, and miraculous defined in a very limited physical way. You know, not again the transformation of the soul, but always something that was transformational in one leg lengthening. Now we learned that from the Protestants where the preacher would pray over your short leg and pull it out, and everybody would be aghast. But it was the same thing all over again. [laughter]

Brian McLaren: Yes. In fact, I had a friend who was a Pentecostal preacher and he told me they called those Pentecostal parlor games. [laughter] But, you know, and here you have some sincere people, and no doubt, you have some con artists playing on sincere people, and you have some sincere people turning into con artists, and all the rest. But it's a reminder to us that in both religion and politics, there is an awful lot based on trust of authority. So, let me mention this first one of these biases for today, it's called confidence bias. We mistake confidence for competence, and we are all vulnerable to the lies of confident people. Our brains prefer a confident lie to a hesitant truth.

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Brian McLaren: And this has been tested in so many ways. You know, psychologists have been studying this in all different kinds of ways, but there is this proclivity that we have. And I I'm ashamed to admit this, but I feel this too. I know this politician is lying. I know he's a liar, and yet I want him to be true. Like there's some part of me that wants to give this authority figure the benefit of the doubt. I'm listening to this preacher, something in me, because he's so confident, feels drawn to it, even as I'm seeing through it. And that's confidence bias. And obviously it goes very far in the world of religion. It goes very far in the world of politics, not to mention the world of sales. And it's ironic, isn't it, that sometimes the more you learn, the more hesitant you become. And then in a sense, because you're more competent, you're more hesitant, and then people are less likely to believe you. It's a catch-22 of all of us who are in the teaching world, I think.

Richard Rohr: When that hits me is when I hear people, their voices raise, and very often, to be honest, they'll use a four-letter word: dammit or hell. And you can be assured there will be an applause, assured, because they sound so confident. Four-letter words give you a sense of, "Well, this must be right, or he wouldn't use the F word." It's so stupid. [laughter] And yet, I mean, count, count whenever that kind of language is used, there will be an applause from the crowd, "Yes, we agree with your confidence." It's a giveaway. Civil discourse doesn't need, I'm not trying to be a Puritan here, just trying to be honest, doesn't need four-letter words to communicate the truth of what he or she is saying. So, I find this one very true. We prefer a confident lie to a hesitant truth.

Jacqui Lewis: I think, especially after we've bought it.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: After we've purchased it; after we've bought the car after we've paid for the class, after we've elected the official—

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: --my gosh, we are happy to hear what they have to say to confirm that we made the right choice even when we're wrong and they're wrong.

Brian McLaren: You know, we need to keep coming back to the issue of race because to be in America is to be in a country with a racist history. And it just strikes me how White people, we grow up, we don't know anything about America's past and we go to a Fourth of July parade and we think, "Oh, nice country we got here." And it's the only place we've ever known. We think it's great, and then we learn a little bit of our history. And I think a lot of White people start feeling insecure. They start feeling afraid. They start feeling ashamed about this past, and you can see why that would set people up for a confident person who comes and tells them we're the greatest. We don't have anything to apologize for. It's a susceptibility, I think, that's really built into White people in our country.

Jacqui Lewis: And Brian, when you titled this section about, you know, kind of con artists, if you will, I think the leaders who traffic in this kind of lying, I think they've done their homework. I think they've done their research about how to market themselves in a racist nation, as a confident leader who will make you feel okay about your racism. Do you know what I mean? Like they are smart enough to understand the vulnerability of a person who's waking up, who's coming to understand the history.

I did this race class right after George Floyd was killed, an anti-racism class. Three thousand three hundred people came to this class. I just, I think there was a big hunger, a big hunger for some wisdom. And I wasn't like rocket science out there. I just like pulled up some stuff about Thomas Jefferson. And like, "Let's think about our Founding Fathers." And people were like, "What? I didn't know that," like, "I didn't know that about framing documents. I didn't know that about slaveholders." So, there are a lot of good-hearted people who are tricked—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: --by the trickiness.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. False innocence is very dangerous.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. Yes. Yes, that's right. That's right.

Brian McLaren Well, let me just give a quick summary of something I just did some writing about on my blog. I call it the fifth electorate, and it's based on some research done by someone named Steve McIntosh, great writer and a fantastic book called Developmental Politics. And in many ways, what we talked about in the last episode with consciousness bias, he applies that to our political situation. And Steve says we don't just have two parties, we have four electorates. I'm going to slightly change the language here, but there's what we might call the left-wing, which is the progressive

electorate. Then there's the left-of-center ring. We'll call that the liberal electorate. Then there's the right-of-center. We'll call that the conservative. And then there's the far-right. We'll call that the traditionalist. And each of these electorates has values, good values. They probably have some weaknesses and blind spots, too, but they have good values.

Well, my proposal is that what's happened in the last several years, is that a new electorate has arisen on the far-right, and I'll call it the authoritarian electorate. It turns out that there's a good bit of psychological research that really flowered in the years after World War II, when scholars around the world wondered how could Germans fall for Hitler? And so, there's all this study of what was called authoritarian personality and authoritarian followership. There's a good bit of data that says about thirty percent of people in every culture where it's been tested have a kind of built-in, their brain is wired for susceptibility to authoritarianism. And what I think has happened is that in our country, the Republican Party that used to have conservatives and traditionalists, has been taken over by authoritarians. And, Richard, you really made me think of this in the last, in our last episode when you talked about winning and the power of winning.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Because for authoritarians, the only value is winning. And when you said that the either/or becomes all or nothing, winning is everything, and you're allowed to cheat, you're allowed to lie, you're allowed to solicit help from foreign powers. Anything is okay if it helps you win because of the way that that sort of mind space that we get into here. And this rise of authoritarianism helps me understand what's going on in our country. It helps me understand what's at stake and helps me understand the danger of confidence. And it's ironic, isn't it, especially for the three of us who are teachers and preachers, we speak with confidence. We speak with boldness. Yet, one of the things that we want to boldly teach people about is the danger of falling prey.

Richard Rohr: Danger of that. [laughter]

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. That's right.

Richard Rohr: Very true. Well, you know, to get really home, I hope I'm not overstepping, but in the biographies of our present president and vice president, we know for a fact they both had very authoritarian fathers and that gives them a kind of comfort, I think. We see how comfortable our president is with authoritarian leaders and thinks he's doing good when he's authoritarian. Gee! And to the rest of us, it just doesn't make a bit of sense. But this is striking.

Brian McLaren: Richard, this strikes me, too, when you've talked about moving from the first half of life to the second half of life. And, you know, I have a little four-stage schema, I call that transition stage three, that people go through this change, and for many people, it's the first time in their life where they've doubted an authority figure. In other words, they want to be good soldiers. They want to be good Christians, or good Patriots, or whatever, so they believe what their authoritarian authorities tell them with such utter confidence. But there comes a point in almost all of our lives, if we are willing to grow this far, where we say, I've got to call BS on that, I think that's wrong. And, Jacqui, you were a little girl and you saw it in the solicitation

of money. You started thinking, so you were ready at a young age to question what the authorities were doing. And that seems to me to be one of the things that authoritarian leaders do, is they squash dissent.

Jacqui Lewis: Yep.

Brian McLaren: And this ability to question the confident, it seems to me, it's really a key to learning how to see.

Richard Rohr: Certitude is very comforting for most people.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. Yes, it is.

Richard Rohr: For most people, we love to be certain. It takes away our anxiety.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right. Yeah. And I was thinking one of the gifts that so-called marginalized communities, just wanting to quote Ruby Sales, "People on the margins don't think of themselves from the margins, but the authority figures do." But the gift, I think that comes from being outside is that you are not as convinced about the authority. I mean, you're really not that. So, that's what happened when Protestants outside question Catholicism. That's what happened when Jewish followers of Jesus questioned the Roman Empire. That's what happens when Black Lives Matter activists today question policing and people freak out when they see defund the police, even as they watch a policeman shoot a person in the back seven times, just like, because you didn't mind me. You didn't mind me. You didn't stop. Let me grab you by the shirt and shoot you. Well, let's not defund the police because that's defunding authority.

But, actually, what the outsiders are saying is let's reframe how we think about community safety. You know, let's reframe it. And so, I wanted to say there's some gift that happens from communities that are not so-called normative and that's the ability to see differently. I also wanted to say, everybody should read Mary Trump's book about her uncle.

Richard Rohr: Read what is it?

Jacqui Lewis: Read Mary Trump's book about her uncle.

Richard Rohr: Oh.

Jacqui Lewis: She, who is a psychotherapist, is not really being mean. She's really helping us to understand the background that can create a person who can be so blindly, you know, narcissistic and harmful. So, it's a good read.

Brian McLaren: Well, if there are two places that attract narcissistic, hyper-confident people whose confidence surpasses their competence, it's religion and politics.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, that's correct.

Brian McLaren: And that brings me to another bias, our second one for today, and it's called conspiracy

bias. Again, there's a huge amount of data from social psychology and psychology about this. Here is conspiracy bias: When we feel shame, we are vulnerable to stories that cast us as the victims of an evil conspiracy by some enemy other. Our brains like stories in which we're either the hero or the victim, never the villain.

So, in the presence of shame, we're especially attracted to stories that cast us as victims of an evil conspiracy by some enemy other. That's the big idea. And, of course, as we speak, there's this set of conspiracies that have been spreading. I mean, they're absurd, but they're spreading through churches largely. And they have this wonderful thing that they confer upon people: We're the innocent victim. Yeah. And people are attracted. I guess all of us have this glitch in our brains that makes us be attracted to this kind of conspiracy bias. Have y'all seen it out there? Does that make sense?

Richard Rohr: Oh, gosh. Where do we start? Yeah. Once you play the victim card, you're in control of the whole room. No one can come back. "You poor thing." We've all got to show our sympathy for you being victimized. And again, the left plays this card almost as much as the right does, maybe more in some ways. When I teach on the scapegoat to the Living School, I make the point how one of the many reasons I am committed to Jesus is Jesus does the victim thing right. He neither plays the victim nor uses his position to victimize other people. He learns from his victimization. And that's just the highest level of enlightenment, when you can learn from your victimization, instead of playing it for your own aggrandizement, or victimizing others because now you have a right: "I was screwed so I get to screw you." Forgive me.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes, yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, I think that's right, Richard, and the three of us as theologians, who, the three of us who do God talk for a living, I'm going to say something that might be highly offensive so I apologize in advance, but in some ways, the way many preachers like to cast the Gospel is as a conspiracy.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Right? Like, it's predestined—

Richard Rohr: Wow, I see.

Jacqui Lewis: --that some of us are chosen.

Richard Rohr: I see, yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: It's predestined that some of us are authorized to go take the land and discover it and keep what we find. There's a kind of narrative. There's a certain kind of faith narrative that is in itself, a conspiracy that casts us as helpless or hero.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Right?

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jacqui Lewis: God is in charge and there's nothing we can do so the earth is burning, but, you know, that's supposed to happen before Armageddon; helpless or hero where the chosen ones that God has put in place to make the world what it's supposed to be. Those to me feel like, that feels like a really uncomfortable truth.

Brian McLaren: It's like a shortcut out of moral responsibility—

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. Yes.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brian McLaren: --and a shortcut, easy out from our shame. And obviously none of us want to live with shame, but there's a sense of moral responsibility that we learn how to take, that in some ways is the grown-up way, I suppose, of dealing with our failures, and our shame and our guilt, and all the rest. And here's where we come back to con artists. If a con artist knows how to appeal to you as a poor victim of some horrible enemy, now he has you because he's made you feel innocent, and pure, and a victim. And he's made some other enemy that now, follow me against this enemy, or we'll be the ones who stand up to this enemy. And this is the trick of authoritarian leaders, fascism and all the rest, that we've seen arise through history. It happens again and again and again.

Jacqui Lewis: And the horrible enemy in this conspiracy I'm talking about is the, quote, devil.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: So, we don't have to think about whether we have evil inside us. We don't have to think about whether we're not, we're people of the lie, that all of the badness is out there projected onto the adversary, right, on diablo, and we are victims to that unless we are stridently whatever the preacher says or whatever the religious teaching says.

Richard Rohr: Maybe this is the place to say what I know you both know, that many of these overlap here, you know, you feel real good to be smart enough to notice the conspiracy, to have spotted the conspiracy. It gives you a kind of intellectual, moral one-upmanship. You know, "I'm not going to be fooled. I see that there's a conspiracy." So, it overlaps with the competency bias. Probably several others too.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right, Richard.

Brian McLaren: Well, this, if we step back and say human beings, we have this, we're not just saying other people have this.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Brian McLaren: It seems to be a feature of the human brain. Suddenly you realize how vulnerable we are. And it speaks to the responsibility of good teachers and good parents to help educate us as we grow up, about the danger of con artists and the temptation of conspiracy theories. And

for those of us involved in the world of religion, one of our huge jobs, it seems to me, is to go back in and scrutinize our doctrines, and scrutinize our sermons, and so many of these things that we start to see, oh, yeah, we've played into these. We even have made them. We've even made them part of our liturgies in some ways.

Jacqui Lewis: Richard, when I was a new preacher, you know, thirty-something year old, I think every Easter sermon, every Good Friday to Easter, I was like, "He had to die. He had to die. He had to die." I was going to say that one way or the other, he had to die. So, Mark Taylor had been one of my professors at Princeton and came to church once. And he was like, "What are you saying? He had to die." I'm like, "It's in there: He had to die." I didn't have the ability to stand back and have a critical analysis of what I was saying, like atonement.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: I just couldn't. It was so thick in me that I couldn't imagine that there was another thing that God could do. So, I'm telling on myself.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, which puts you inside of a universe of fatalism, of determinism.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Richard Rohr: There's no freedom. Whereas the Gospel, rightly preached, expands your freedom.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen.

Richard Rohr: It doesn't say God had to, or even we have to, to get God to love us.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. Amen. Oh, my God. So, needless to say, we ain't there now, but—

Richard Rohr: No, we aren't there now, yeah. The idea that God could love us for nothing is still inconceivable to most Christians. Thank you for bringing that up. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. It's just crazy town.

Brian McLaren: Well, here we are. We're vulnerable human beings. And I suppose we're in the situation that I was when I was about twenty-seven years old and my wife kept saying to me, "Have you noticed whenever you read, you squint?" And she said, "I think you need to go get your eyes tested." And I think part of what we're helping people see is that all of us have some astigmatism, all of us have some nearsightedness or farsightedness, all of us have some colorblindness, that learning how to see is not as easy as it looks.

Jacqui Lewis: Rabbi Hartman at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, a bunch of us pastors were there one time, and he was telling the stories that rabbis tell about like, "What does the Midrash say?" He ended up saying it is our highest ethical calling to learn how to see. It is our highest ethical calling to learn how to see where our enemy needs love, where our friend, you know-- I was like, "Yeah, that goes with what Brian is saying today."

Richard Rohr: Well, Jesus does say, "Be careful how you see." I should have the chapter and verse in front of me, but it's hidden in the middle of a longer narrative and you can easily skip over it. "Be careful how you see." I'll try to look it up before the next session.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you, Richard.

Brian McLaren: You know, Richard, and this strikes me, something that we try to teach through CAC is that part of contemplation is helping people say, “I don’t know,” helping people live with not knowing.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Brian McLaren: And it’s funny, isn’t it, until you can get comfortable with saying, “I don’t know,” there’s a different confidence that comes from being able to say, “I don’t know.” And I think people who never get comfortable with that, they remain susceptible to confidence bias so much.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brian McLaren: And when we, in some way, are able to enter that realm of radical grace, that doesn’t require a conspiracy to give us a shortcut out of our shame but actually posits that God is love, that God’s grace is so great that to fall into the hands of God is to fall into the hands of absolute love, then in some ways, we get our vaccination against conspiracy theories. [music]

Jacqui Lewis: [laughter] That’s very good. That’s really good. Yeah.

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.