

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

Brian McLaren

Jacqui Lewis

with Richard Rohr

5: What You Focus on Determines
What You Miss

Brian McLaren: I have five amazing grandchildren. I'll show you pictures. But in addition to my four wonderful granddaughters, I have one grandson. His name is Lucas, and he reminds me so much of me when I was a boy. I was that kid who was always out looking for grasshoppers, and leopard frogs, and garter snakes, and finding bird nests, and cocoons, and praying mantises, and that's Lucas. Wherever we go together, it's, "Look, Pop Pop, there's a lizard! Look, Pop Pop, there's a caterpillar! Look, Pop Pop!" And he always is seeing amazing, beautiful things. I've noticed that that ability to catch things out of the corner of your eye, to discern a slight disruption of a pattern, it's that ability to see fine differences that makes it possible for people like Lucas and, to a lesser degree these days, me, pick out wildlife.

I had an experience some years ago. I had the wonderful opportunity to go to the Galapagos Islands. And we were in a little excursion boat on high seas, big waves that every once in a while washed over the side of our little motorboat. And we were about to go snorkeling. And some of us were scuba diving, and our guide said, "Keep your eyes open. This is a place where we often see the Mola mola, which is the ocean sunfish." He said, "Sometimes they go near the surface, and you'll see a fin cutting the surface. It looks like the fin of a shark." And so, we sat there in the rise and the fall of the waves, looking. And I saw one, I shouted out: "There it is! There it is!" And everybody looked and got to see the Mola mola. A few minutes later, "I saw it again. I saw another one over on the other side of the boat! I saw another one!"

I was always the person seeing the Mola, and I realized it's because I'm a fisherman back home, and I fish for tarpon and very often you see a tarpon break the surface. And I realized I'd developed a search image for the surface of the water. That ability to look for a disturbance of the pattern is what helped me as a fisherman and what helped me that day as a Mola-mola sighter. The flip side, of course, is "what you focus on," as one of my mentors told me, "what you focus on determines what you miss," What you look for, your search image helps you see that thing, but it might mean you miss other things.

Some years ago, I was at an event, and a friend of mine was teaching, and he put up a video on the screen. You can find a version of this online if you look today. Just search-- Well, I don't even want to tell you what to search for because it gives away the story, but he said, "This is a test of your ability to concentrate." He said, "There are people with white shirts and people with dark shirts, and the white-shirt people will be throwing to other white-shirt people and the dark-shirt people will be throwing to other dark-shirt people, your job is to pick one of the shirts and only count the number of times that that team throws to a member of their team. Ignore everything else. Just focus on that." And so, I remember I counted, you know, "Seven, eight, nine, twelve, fourteen, seventeen, twenty-one. Twenty-one!" [music] I paid such close attention. I was sure the answer was twenty-one. And so, we watched the video.

Everyone came together. He said, "Okay, who followed the white shirts? What did you see?" Some people said, "sixteen, seventeen, nineteen," but the answer was twenty-one. I was right. "What about the dark-shirt people?" "Oh, "Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-two." And the answer was twenty-two. And then he said, "How many of you saw the gorilla?" And I had no idea what he was talking about. A few people raised their hand, but most of us didn't. And he said, "Well, I'm going to play the video again." And this time when I watched the video, halfway through, a guy in a gorilla suit walks across the stage between all the people

throwing their balls and then walks off the stage. And I said, “You’re showing us a different video.” He said, [laughing] “No, this is the same one you saw. This is actually a test of your ability to keep open, have multiple focuses as opposed to just one because what you focus on determines what you miss.”

It’s a great gift to be able to focus, but it has a flip side. The very act of focusing, like a camera, you focus on the foreground, the background becomes blurry. You focus on the background, the closer images become blurry, maybe even disappear. I look at a mountain, I see hardwoods and conifers. I see good habitat for the wood thrush and scarlet tanager, being a bird watcher. I see a fun place to take my grandson, Lucas, to look for salamanders, which are his great love in nature. Someone else pulls up to that same mountain, and he thinks we could blow the top off that thing and make a million dollars mining coal.

Welcome, everyone, to Learning How to See. It has been such a pleasure for me to get to hang out with two people I love dearly, Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis and Fr. Richard Rohr, what wonderful friends, and companions, and people. We can kind of stand and try to see together and help one another see more deeply. Last time, we talked about two biases that affect our ability to see—confidence bias and conspiracy bias—where we’re taken in by people who are confident, and we’re taken in by stories that cast us as either the hero or the victim and never the villain. And, Richard, you had said something about, you know, how Jesus had a lot to say about both seeing and hearing that seems highly relevant.

Richard Rohr: Yes. I had quoted at that time that Jesus said, “Be careful how you see.” I just checked the Bible. In Mark IV it’s, “Be careful how you listen.” But as you and others have pointed out, he says an awful lot in the Sermon on the Mount about the eyes being the lamp of the soul. And if you’re seeing is incorrect, what blindness there will be, huh? Wow! So, the theme of our whole series here seems to be something Jesus talked about, in a central way, that you have to critique your own seeing, your own biases. And so, don’t let people call this modern psychology, this is from the Sermon on the Mount.

Brian McLaren: My gosh, as soon as you say that Richard, I think of another passage in the Sermon on the Mount, “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own?” And so, in some ways, when we’re talking about learning how to see, we’re trying to help get those logs—

Richard Rohr: Those logs out of our eyes. Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: And it’s so good when you all are talking about the teachings of Jesus. You know, I think one of the things that we don’t see as Christians is the Jewishness of him, of Rabbi Jesus.

Richard Rohr: Good point.

Jacqui Lewis: So, I had mentioned this, Rabbi Hartman, who said, you know, the ethical life is about learning how to see. The story he told to get us there was explaining the Leviticus laws about how you treat your neighbor’s stuff, right? So, it says, you know, do not covet your neighbor’s things. Well, the rabbis on the rabbis, say if you see your neighbor’s cow wandering in the field and the cow wanders into your field, when the cow gets there, you return the cow to your neighbor. If you can’t find the neighbor, you keep the cow, you feed the cow, and then

you return the cow. If you see your neighbor's cow fall down, you are to pick up the neighbor's cow and help him on his way. All of this is in the love God, love neighbor, love self teaching from Rabbi Jesus. That kind of love that makes you even see your enemy's cow in trouble, you're supposed to help it. So, that's how he got to the ethic of seeing. Can you see your enemy?

Brian McLaren: That's great.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Isn't that good?

Richard Rohr: Yeah. So normal, so ordinary.

Jacqui Lewis: Well, it's like, ordinary. Help that neighbor across the street, for God's sake.

Brian McLaren: Well, speaking of ordinary, the three biases we want to look at today are really, really down-to-earth, practical issues that we face constantly. And I just want to mention all three of them, and then we can talk about all three of them. The first one is comfort bias. Now, I'm naming all these with the letter "C." I could have called this complacency bias or convenience bias, so any of those will do. Our brains welcome data that allows us to relax and be happy, and our brains reject data that require us to adjust, work, or inconvenience ourselves. Our brains want to conserve our energy. And even before we have a chance to notice it, our brains are tuning out things that will make us feel uncomfortable and maybe have to spring into action. So, that's comfort bias.

Richard Rohr: That might be the one I'm personally most guilty of. [laughter] In my first reaction, "Is this going to be more work?" If it's going to be more work, and "Oh, God, I'm not going to let it be true." [laughter] I don't need anymore work. Now I'm very self-protective of more work. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: That's hilarious.

Brian McLaren: Yes, well, and all of us, I think, can identify. The next one is, I'm calling catastrophe bias. But before I explain it, I want to give the opposite of it, which is called normalcy bias. It's catastrophe/normalcy bias. And I think the best way I can explain this is with something that I think the three of us are old enough to remember. And here it is. Do you all remember when you were children, when you were young and we would drive somewhere in a car in the summer that we would get back home and our windshield would be covered in bugs?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Brian McLaren: And that hardly ever happens anymore. I don't know if you've noticed, but it hardly ever happens like it used to.

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Brian McLaren: And I live in at the edge of the Everglades, which you would think is one of the buggiest places on the earth. I have not had to clean my windshield the way we had to clean all the time when I was a little kid growing up in upstate New York. Now, I'm sure there are still nights where there are a lot of bugs out, but here's the thing: Scientists tell us that we're in the midst of a mass insect die-off. I read just yesterday that the total biomass of nonhuman being, living things, is down like sixty percent plus since the 1970s and that in many places in the world, the number of insects has absolutely plummeted. Now, here's the thing, so people drive now, and they have no idea what was normal for us decades ago, of bugs being so common that our windshields we could barely see out of.

So, what catastrophe/normalcy bias says is that our brains are wired to notice sudden changes for the worse, but we easily miss slow and subtle changes for the worse or the better. In other words, our brains see disaster and catastrophe, but they don't notice the slow decline of normalcy or the baseline. Our brains are wired to set a normal, and then we just assume that that normal has always been and always will be, and we're afraid of catastrophe. It goes a bit back to that old story, which I don't think is true, but might be, that if you put a frog in hot water, it'll jump out, but if you put it in cold water and slowly heat it up, you know, that it will eventually boil, and it won't notice. Our brains work something like that. So, we have comfort bias, we have catastrophe bias, and then we have cash bias. And this is really the bias of vested interest. It is very hard for us to see anything that interferes with our way of making a living. Our brains are wired to see within the framework of our economy, and we see what helps us make money. And especially in our economy, this is something we are super-oriented toward, which, Jacqui, goes back a bit to the rabbi story because if I see my neighbor's cow walking into my yard, my first thought could be, "I just got richer. I have another cow."

Jacqui Lewis. Exactly. Yep. Yep.

Brian McLaren: And so, from the start, to avoid that kind of selfishness bias. So, there are three biases that affect our daily lives, and I just wonder, anything, does that take you anywhere, or make you notice anything, or ring any bells for either of you?

Richard Rohr: I remember when it first hit me that Jesus called the sons of Zebedee away from their nets, their occupational way of making money, and it seemed to me a bit unfair, you know. And this is rather clear, they left their father and their nets, that for people in that culture, but now in our culture, too, you better not call into question anything that limits or critiques my occupation, my way of making money, that cash bias. In a capitalist country, that's just sacrosanct. It really is. Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: That's a good point.

Brian McLaren: Richard, I had a kind of a difficult few months a couple years ago where I just started to feel how controlled we are by money. It just, it really started to sink in, and it hit me as a preacher. I don't mean to be, you know, I'm not asking for therapy here, but

I had this feeling like I've wasted my life preaching because I didn't understand the power of money over people. I tried to teach them truth without challenging the economic framework that they function in, and I realized that cash is king. I realized that money has so much power. And I went through this sort of deep, deep disillusionment about this. But that story, I think, brings this to mind, and it brings all those teachings of Jesus to mind like you can't serve both God and money. You will either love one and hate the other, or despise one and cling to the other, like strong language about the power of money.

Richard Rohr: Strong.

Jacqui Lewis: Very strong.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. I'm thinking about it, logs in my eye and specks in other folks's eyes, right, in this second as I'm going to tell this story about sort of my theological resistance when I first got to seminary. That first semester, I felt like, what are y'all doing? You know, we are just going to dismantle all of the things I thought were so sacred about the texts. They're not, but I thought they were. I mean, everything from, you know, is Moses floating in a basket or not, to did you cross a Red Sea or was it a reed sea? Was it mud? You know, what was that? You know, I was like, "Wait a minute. Stop! Don't take away my stories." You know? So, there was a real resistance I had to that, a certain kind of work that I had to do to open my mind and my heart.

And similarly, there was a couple in my church. Usually our Christmas season is just like light, and joy, and up, and whatever, but the first year that the people were in cages, the first year that the children were in cages, our musicians decided to do some really strange, we did some strange Christmas Eve with like border patrol lights flashing, and, you know, we made a manger with a cage. I mean it was provocative, and one of our couples just quit the church, like "We are done. Thank you so much." It may be it was coming, but they just were like, "You can't make Christmas Eve dark like that."

Brian McLaren: Ah, yes.

Jacqui Lewis: I think, similar to my own comfort bias, my brain, when I first got to seminary I did not want to take in theology that crushed my old theology. I think a lot of people sitting in the pews, a lot of people going to the polls, don't want to have their vision changed, right, about what God is up to.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes. This really circles back to simplicity and complexity bias that we talked about in the first episode, but that we are comfortable with simplicity. And when complexity comes along, it makes us uncomfortable. And now we have this emotional reaction of comfort that our comfort bias, it just makes me uncomfortable, and I don't want to be made uncomfortable.

It reminds me, a Baptist pastor, friend of mine, preached a sermon. Oh, this is in probably 2004 when we were, you know, deep in the Iraq War, and he was preaching through the Sermon on the Mount. So, he came to Jesus's statement about not an eye for an eye, turn the other cheek, not an eye for an eye, but turn the other cheek. And one of his elders came up

to him and said, “Pastor, I think it’s very inappropriate for you to teach that when our nation is at war.”

Richard Rohr: Wow. [laughing]

Brian McLaren: And so, he said, “It’s in the Gospels! It’s right there in the Gospels! I’m preaching this Sermon on the Mount, I had no choice.” And the elder said, “I’ve always thought that was the weak point of Jesus’s teaching.” [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Don’t let it have any edge to it. Yeah. Wow.

Brian McLaren: Anything that disturbs our comfort, yeah, it makes it hard for us to hear.

Jacqui Lewis: I love Walter Wink’s exegetical work on that whole turn-the-other-cheek thing.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: It was pretty radical. Like, Jesus was actually saying, “Turn your cheek, and force this person to slap you on the strong side.” I’m like, “What?” But deeply, deeply subversive was our Jesus, right?

Brian McLaren: It was a call to nonviolent resistance.

Jacqui Lewis: Exactly.

Brian McLaren: That’s exactly right. Yup. Yeah. So, you just think about issues that we’re facing in the world today. Like, for example, if we go back, you know, we’re in the year of COVID, and if we go back to February or January when people were first hearing about this, and they had to tell us that an invisible threat was coming and it wasn’t going to arrive all on the same day. It wasn’t like planes running into skyscrapers, but it was going to be even more deadly, but it would come gradually, you can imagine everyone’s comfort bias said, “I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want to, I don’t. I have enough trouble already. Don’t add this to me.” Catastrophe bias, this is a slow-motion catastrophe. I mean, the thought of, you know, we’re nearing 200,000 dead from the disease. I mean, it’s a huge catastrophe, but people are relatively unexercised about it, many people. And then cash: “This will affect the economy. I don’t want to even acknowledge this is real.” You put those three together and you just think, of course we were liable to being misled about this. And then you think of climate change, same kind of problem. It goes against, it has to break through three different kinds of bias to get through to us. My goodness, it’s—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brian McLaren: We’re working against a lot in our own ways.

Richard Rohr: It’s amazing anybody does break through. And what we mean by enlightenment, or awareness, or salvation is several deaths to the ego, several serious deaths to me being the reference point, or my way of seeing being the only right one.

Jacqui Lewis: That's so good.

Richard Rohr: If you can't call that into question, you don't get to the first grade.

Jacqui Lewis: I am so-- That's right, Richard, and this idea that this conversation, you know, I wish maybe, Brian, you're going to do this and take all of this wisdom and turn it into a children's book too. You know, how young are we when we begin to form our resistance to stories that don't fit to ideas, that don't fit to the things that our parents haven't said, and everything outside of that is whatever, I mean, all of this racism and xenophobia, you know? The anniversary of 9/11 is right in here and how much the story of horrific Muslims who hate our way of life is still the story. How many times do we hear, "Never forget; never forget; never forget"? And we don't ask ourselves to remember what kind of neighbor we are around the globe that provokes some of the ways people respond to us, you know?

Brian McLaren: In fact, Jacqui, that's a perfect example because the catastrophe of that day is so indelibly marked on our minds, and our brains are wired for catastrophe. But our brains weren't wired to say for the last thirty or forty years, "What has our role been in the world? How much resentment have we been stirring up against us as a nation?" Our brains aren't so wired to that. So, then you think, and I'm so glad you bring up children because you think this, we teach people reading, writing, arithmetic, we should be teaching people how to see and how to be suspicious of our own blind spots.

Jacqui Lewis: That is exactly right.

Brian McLaren: And this catastrophe blindness is really, really serious. And this comfort blindness, really, it's a life-and-death matter, but it doesn't feel like it.

Jacqui Lewis: It's the same thing with the border. I mean, I think about the very real-- I mean, I guess these things are connected in my mind guys, right, like this idea that there is a foreign threat to us, and they came and got us.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. And so, at the border that translates to the foreign threat to us that came to get us, but we don't see that those people are coming for their stuff. They're coming for their land. We took that land, and they want that land, you know, they want to come back to the space. We don't see how our earliest ways to build a nation were built on this foundation of lies and taking of land and enslavement of bodies. And so, of course, people are upset about that today. So, yeah, let's teach our children how to see, teach our children well, how to see better.

Richard Rohr: You know, to dip back into the levels of consciousness, if there are nine levels that are more or less agreed upon, some have seven, some have a little more, it's not until the fifth level, the so-called orange level, that we become capable of self-critical thinking, self-critical or critical. Now, if you're not there yet at the so-called orange level, you don't have to use that language, but you think all criticism is traitorous, rebellious, lacking in patriotism.

Jacqui Lewis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: But in fact, it's only when you pass through the orange level where you're capable of self-criticism, but you don't sit there and just continue to throw rocks. Now I agree that's not enlightenment, but we're so afraid of critical thinking that we don't allow people what is necessary, which is self-critical thinking. Oh, it's just, you get so tired of it. I mean, how many times I've been told in letter, and email, and to my face that, "You don't love the Church because you criticize the Church." You get tired of it as a Catholic, you know. I say, "Well, Jesus criticized Judaism."

It's actually, in the right voice, critical thinking joined with compassion, which are levels six and seven, is in fact, enlightenment.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: It's not a sign of a rebel, or a heretic, or an unbeliever as you're called, when you're at the early levels of consciousness. Anybody who doesn't conform to our agreed-upon certitudes is dangerous. You and I would say, I think, anybody who can't critique his own group, his own system, his own self, his own temperament, his own illusions, they are dangerous.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right.

Richard Rohr: But it's a stage you must go through. And I always say, "Just don't stay there too long, because then you become a negative person."

Jacqui Lewis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brian McLaren: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Negative, constantly harping and complaining about my group, and I show that I'm smarter than my group by pointing out its faults. You have to do that, but that's not all you have to do. You have to get to reorder, as I put in my order > disorder > reorder paradigm, and again, learn to love what you have critiqued.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Amen.

Richard Rohr: That's even a smaller percentage of people who can love what they have critiqued.

Jacqui Lewis: I wish, Richard, that what you just said would be emblazoned into like a new amendment, or something, to the Constitution, you know?

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Like a way to reframe patriotism is to love this nation enough to be able to be conscious of what needs to be fixed, to criticize it and love it, and criticize it and love it, and make it better.

Richard Rohr: There you go. There you go. That's wisdom.

Brian McLaren: I just read recently, someone said, "If you have an old house and you really, really love it,

then you don't move away. You stay in the house and you knock out that wall that's termite infested and rebuild it. And you replace that old bathroom that leaks, and you rebuild it." You're aware of all of its problems and because you love it, you address the problems.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. That's right. That's really good.

Richard Rohr: That's good.

Brian McLaren: Yeah. Well, this strikes me, one of the things I'm going to take away from this conversation is just that part of growing up is learning how to become critical of your own blind spots, learning how to be interested in yours and your groups—yourself as an individual and the groups you're part of—where are we susceptible to comfort bias? Where are we right now so looking for catastrophes that we're missing the slow-motion disasters that are spreading like a pandemic or like climate change? And where are we blinded by money from seeing what really, really has value? And there is a huge part of our work, isn't it—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brian McLaren: --as preachers, as teachers, as writers, helping people to acknowledge our blind spots and to see what really has value?

Jacqui Lewis: I love that summary, Brian, and just thinking about economy, thinking about cash, thinking about God's economy, like maybe our job as preachers and teachers also is to help people to get into the framework of the household of God. Like, what's God's icon, what's God's household like? And how does that affect the way we see each other, and the way we see our resources, and the way we imagine a world in which everyone has enough? And what happens if we take that with us into the world...of voting and living together? See the way God sees, you know?

Brian McLaren: There's an aspiration for us to take with us. Thanks, friends.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you.

Brian McLaren: Well done.

Richard Rohr: Good stuff. And, I'm still learning, still learning.

Jacqui Lewis: Still learning.

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.