

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

Brian McLaren

Jacqui Lewis

with Richard Rohr

6: Seeing, Doubt, Action,
and Contemplation

Brian McLaren: So, I imagine if I could get in a time machine and go back to find the twenty-three-, or twenty-five-, or twenty-six-year-old version of me and take myself out to breakfast-- Back then, I was a young preacher. I had been a college English teacher. I started teaching while I was in graduate school. And while I was in graduate school, my wife and I started a little fellowship group, and one thing led to another; that became a little church. And eventually when I was twenty-six, I left teaching to just work with the church full-time. But if I could go back, knowing what I know now, I imagine what I would tell that version of myself with long brown hair and a black beard, and now the wrinkly, bald guy version of me with glasses would be sitting at the breakfast table and say, "Listen, man, I got to tell you something. Every week you prepare a sermon, you get up every Sunday and you try to inspire, and persuade, and confront, and encourage, and challenge a wonderful community of people to become their best possible selves, to grow into their full potential, to live by Jesus' core teaching, meaning to love God and their neighbor and themselves.

Every week, you're getting up to do that, but you're working under a false assumption. Your assumption is that you just have to prove something to them rationally. You have to show them a Bible passage and logically interpret it. And then when they see it, when they understand this interpretation, then they'll get it, [music] and they'll live in line with it, and their behavior will change. Everything you are doing is appealing to their brain, to their reasoning, to their logic, and I don't know if the twenty-five-, or twenty-six-, or twenty-eight-year-old me would have understood this. I might have said, "Yeah, of course, that's what I'm doing. That's what I'm supposed to do. The truth sets people free." The problem was I was so naive back then about how many barriers there are inside all of us to the truth getting through. I've heard that saying "The truth will set you free, but first it will really make you mad." In other words, for the truth that we need to liberate us to get through, it has to battle its way past so many filters, so many walls, so many screens, so many barriers, so many biases.

I didn't realize it, but I'd been raised as a child of the Enlightenment. There was a saying in the Enlightenment that reasonable men will agree. Now, they weren't even thinking about women back then, which tells you something about how reasonable they were, but today we might update it to say reasonable people will agree. Reason brings people together if we can get people to agree on certain statements, if we can get people to agree on a constitution, on a creed, on a doctrinal statement, on a mission statement, if we can get them to rationally, intellectually, understand it and agree, they'll get along. Things will be fine.

The older version of me sitting at that breakfast table with a younger version of me would say, "Listen, man, reasonable people agree on one thing and that is anyone who disagrees with me is unreasonable" because the fact is we bring our biases to everything. We encounter the world through a set of glasses, or to change the metaphor, we see the world through our windshield. And if our windshield is covered in grime, we're going to be in trouble. We have to learn how to clean the windshield. We have to learn, somehow, how to face our biases, but you know, if I could go back in that time machine and tell the twenty-seven-year-old me that important information that I now see so clearly, I just might not have been ready to get it. There were a lot of things working against me getting it. Maybe I had to make a whole set of mistakes. Maybe I had to have a decade or two of frustration working on that assumption to bring me to a place where I could see it.

[music ends] Welcome, everyone, to Learning How to See. Our last episode in this series is called “Seeing Doubt, Contemplation, and Action.” And I want to begin this last series by just reading through again the biases we’ve considered just as a quick review. First is 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. Next is complexity bias, that the human brain prefers a simple lie to a complex truth. Third is community bias, that our brains find it hard to see anything that will get us in trouble with the group that we belong to and that we cherish. Next is complementarity bias, that if people are nice to us, then we’ll be open to what they say, and if we don’t perceive them as liking us or being nice to us, then we’ll be biased against anything they say.

Next is contact bias, that if you lack contact with someone, that you will not be able to see what they see. And then come some highly political biases, conservative/liberal bias, that our brains like to see what our party sees, and we flock with those who see as we do. Then is consciousness bias, that we can only see from a location, from our own level of maturity or consciousness. And then comes competency bias, that our brains like to think of ourselves as above average. As a result, we often underestimate both our incompetence and sometimes our competence as well. Then comes confidence bias, that we prefer a confident lie to a hesitant truth. And then comes comfort bias. I’m sorry. I missed conspiracy bias, that when we feel shame, we’re vulnerable to stories that cast us as victims of some evil conspiracy. And then comes comfort bias, that we welcome data that lets us just relax. And then catastrophe bias, that we are prone to see things that seem immediately and disastrously dangerous, but the slow coming change we find easy to ignore. And then cash bias, we see what brings in the money and if something might cost us something or not be financially profitable, it’s very easy for us to discount it. So, there’s this list of biases and, Richard, you’ve been teaching people now for so many years about seeing as the contemplatives see, and I’m sure you see all kinds of connections here.

Richard Rohr: Okay. What can I say quickly that might be helpful? You know, when I had to get my first degree from the Franciscans in philosophy, and the first year of that was the study of epistemology, a strange and ugly word, but it was entirely, for a whole year, theories of knowledge. How do you know what you think you know? Little did I think—I was twenty years old when I did that—how important that would be in my later life to make me critical of what I know and how I know it. And how did I come to the certitudes I’ve come to?

It was [a] really brilliant education in a philosophical mind to be able to pull back. Then I found that the religious way of doing that was called contemplation, that you pulled back from your own self as the reference point, get your own ego out of the way, we would say, your own hurts, your own wounds, your own temperament, your own Enneagram number, your own affiliation in this country or this racial group, and to see nakedly what is the objective truth here apart from what I want to be the truth.

Now, that doesn’t sound like a very inspiring notion of contemplation, and that’s why I think lot of people give up in the first years because it it’s just rugged work, seeing these filters and seeing how they control what I see and what I don’t let myself see. So, it convinced me to put that in our very title of our center here, action and contemplation.

And as the thirty-two, now thirty-three years have gone by, the teaching of contemplation

was deemed more and more necessary, trusting that those who did that inner work, who became capable of self-criticism, would recognize the biases they have—racially, politically, nationally—all of our biases come crashing down, if you look at yourself with a naked honesty. I mean, the founder of Western philosophy, Socrates, they say he had written over his door, “Know thyself,” that this was the beginning of philosophy, to know yourself. Teresa of Ávila says the same thing. It’s the first Mansion in the Interior Castle is self-knowledge. But with many people today, if you talk about self-knowledge, this is the phrase I’ve had thrown at me many times: “That’s just psychology,” you know, “That’s cheap psychology.” Well, it’s actually the doorway to profound theology because you’re not ready for profound theology until you get rid of your filters. So, that’s the heart of our work here.

Brian McLaren: Oh, my goodness, that strikes me. That’s so powerful. That’s so powerful. It strikes me, anyone who says, “I don’t want to know myself,” is saying, “I don’t want my biases challenged.”

Richard Rohr: That’s right. That’s right. I don’t want my biases challenged. You’ve got it.

Brian McLaren: Jacqui, I love and admire you in so many ways, but you are an activist preacher. You’re out there in the street. You’re out there getting arrested. You’re out there, you’re preaching it, and you’re living it. And I wonder what connections you see between the life of activism and learning to face these biases.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that, Brian. I think I have learned how to see in the streets more connections among humankind than I actually learned in seminary. Everything I ever learned about God I learned in the streets, I could say, maybe. I’m thinking about going to DC five years ago maybe, with the Unitarian Universalists, United Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, all of us, descending upon the building where the senators and the House of Representatives eat their lunch, you know, that building. And getting on a bus early in the morning with friends from Union Seminary and like the lay people from my church, like were on the bus at five o’clock in the morning. And we ride down to DC and two of the men on the bus were African-American men in my church who I knew, but I didn’t know until we did the die-in, Brian and Richard, this part of their story. So, they both are men who had been arrested for being activists in the past and the risk they were taking to get on the bus, to go to the thing, to lay on the floor and to be arrested again, maybe, I didn’t know the vulnerability of these Black men lying down in the street for Black Lives Matter.

There was a young Muslim woman who ended up on camera saying, “I am compelled to stand up for the value of Black lives because standing up for Black lives is standing up for myself,” like a Muslim secular girl, doing activism with Linda Sarsour, who’s a common friend, or an actor like Aunjanue Ellis, who was a performer, to be on the mall with thousands and thousands of women standing up for #metoo and Believe the Women, and to look across the field and see Aunjanue there, this actor I admire who I didn’t know had an activist streak.

I’ve seen people show themselves in those moments, you know, you are thirsty, and someone gives you a bottle of water. You know, you are falling behind in the line and

somebody stops and pauses for you. Some older people are marching, and they're tired, and some kid gives up their chair. It's like a community. It's a congregation, right? It's a congregation.

And so, I see that we might have different theologies. We might name God in different ways, but there's something, Brian and Richard, about love that is ubiquitous, and grace that is ubiquitous. And people will put themselves in the way of tanks. They will put themselves in the streets. They will put themselves in front of batons to stand up for the right to be loved and to have love.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: And that's a good part of my religion. Brian, you've reminded us that religion means being bound together, like the religare, to be bound together. So, I think the people in the streets are bound together by a common vision to see the world as God intended it, where you, and me, and Richard get to hang out together, where older people and younger people are cared for, where everybody has enough, where Mother Earth is respected, where science matters, right, where all lives matter because we take care of the ones that matter the least.

Brian McLaren: Boy, as you say that Jacqui, I have a photograph that I keep on my desk, a photograph of Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama when they were both young.

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes.

Brian McLaren: And I don't know if they had more than one meeting, but shortly before Thomas Merton died, he had a several-day meeting with the Dalai Lama. And in this picture, they just look like two young men who are—

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Very young.

Brian McLaren: --who are kind of intrigued with each other. And I suppose this is where all of these barriers to seeing, they not only exist in us as individuals, but they exist in us as groups. And a huge part of activism is about trying to help people see what they don't want to see. To help White people see that the People of Color that they're marginalizing, and forgetting, and abusing, and using, and disbelieving, that they are real human beings. And that women who have been trying to tell stories about exploitive men for a long time, and they just didn't get believed. We have to listen to them, even though the comfort bias of men is saying, "Don't listen." And even though the cash bias of men is saying, "Don't listen," all these other things are getting in the way. We have to listen. It strikes me that so much of our activist work is trying to help others see past their biases.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. Yes, Brian. Last night in a talk with Ruby, she was saying the marching, the activism, is to show the disparaging ways we're treated when we're in the streets too, do you know?

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Like the see is to see the solidarity, *solidaridad*, to see the connection. But also, when we see how people respond to protest, like we'll never unsee what happened to all those marchers on the [Edmund] Pettus Memorial Bridge, we will never unsee that, right? We'll never unsee dogs snapping and hoses turned on, and our modern-day version of that, you know, peaceful protesters being scattered with pepper spray, so, somebody can have a follow-up. We won't unsee that. It forces us to see how ugly prejudice can be. And then we can do something about it.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Contemplation has helped me, and I can only speak of myself, my own experience, to know what I do not know and cannot see, but action, especially the way you speak of it, Jacqui, and you live it, you and Brian both, it helps me to see how I cannot love. Why is that I do not want to put myself out for this action, this involvement, this act of solidarity, this engagement? It's always-- My inability to act is, invariably for me, a recognition of my inability to love. So, that's why we need both. One has to do with perception more; the other has to do with heart engagement. And that's why we need action and contemplation.

Jacqui Lewis: And contemplation. That's beautiful.

Richard Rohr: At least that's the way my body works, my experience works.

Jacqui Lewis: That's really beautiful.

Brian McLaren: Richard, you said something a few minutes ago. You said, the phrase you used, was "what I want to be the truth." [laughter] And this is, I think, one of our huge problems. There are certain things we want to be true—

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: --and they might not be true. And as long as we want them to be true, somebody has the power to manipulate us because they tell us what we want to be true. And then we're willing to do an awful lot for them especially if they do it confidently, to keep us in that illusion. And I think this is part of our struggle in religion too.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brian McLaren: Religion can tell us the hard truth we don't want to hear, but it also can tell us all the truths that we want to hear to comfort us and keep us in our illusions.

And this is why I think one of the really important skills that we need in learning to see is the skill of doubt. And what I mean by that—obviously doubt can be a problem too—but we have to have the courage to doubt things that we currently find comforting if they're keeping us from the truth, to doubt things that currently help us make money, if they are keeping us from the truth; to doubt things that keep us fitting in with our group, and if we stop thinking them, our group might not accept us, but it could be keeping us from the truth. I think of this. And I think of Jesus' words about counting the cost. And I just realize it is costly to see. It is costly to see. It's difficult. It can make our lives harder. Does that ring true with you both?

Richard Rohr: Oh, of course, of course.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: There is something I've said for so many years that I feel, well, everybody's heard this, and they must be tired of it. But when I say it, there's an aha in the group, invariably, and it's this line: "The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certitude." And when I say that they're just, "Oh!" That should be self-evident. The biblical understanding of faith is to give us the freedom of not needing to know, not needing to be certain. Let's use another word, not needing to be opinionated. Now that emerged in already among the Desert Fathers into two strains of spirituality. I'm going to use two big words, don't be too impressed by them, but they're Greek words and they're often long—the cataphatic tradition, which was to know spiritual things by words, and concepts, and inner experience. It needed to be balanced by the apophatic tradition, which was to know things by silence, by waiting, by not knowing, by suffering. And when you put the cataphatic together with the apophatic, knowing with not needing to know, you have this miraculous notion of biblical faith, which creates people who are open, who always have a beginner's mind, who are always curious, who let you teach them. They're teachable at my age because they're not so certain. So, what an opinion is, is an idea that you've wrapped your ego around; you're invested in.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes.

Richard Rohr: So, I always say be careful of opinions. Now we call it an ideology. And, forgive me, I love America, but it seems to be swimming in ideological cesspools today, where people are so wrapped around their opinions that civil conversation is not possible. So, I'm just building, riffing on what you said, Brian, this notion of doubt, we may doubt into the opposite of faith, and it ain't. In fact, creative doubt is necessary to keep faith broadening, deepening, growing, and emerging. So, this is crucial to what we're trying to say right here.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Jacqui, I'm wondering, any just final reflections that you have thinking back over our conversations over these recent episodes and thinking about your own work and as a pastor, as a writer, as a thinker, as an activist, any final thoughts?

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you, Brian. Well, first of all, I just thank you for taking all the research you did on the topic of bias and turning it into thirteen alliterative moments that we can talk about as good preachers, really accessible. I always find your work so accessible, and as I do Fr. Richard's work. I'm kind of desperate to say to the people who might listen to some of this before November 3rd, that we are each human being, laden with biases. And our job, I think our life job, is to see better, to see better, to see ourselves better, to see each other better. And as a faith person, I think, to see the world the way we believe the God we believe in sees the world, right? Like, to see the world, God is a mystery. We don't have a fact sheet that says this is what God wants. But I think if we interrogate our lives through the lens of love, we see through the lens of love, that'll answer a bunch of questions for ourselves. I'd love for love to be our bias is what I'm trying to say.

Richard Rohr: Wow! Very good.

Jacqui Lewis: You know, just like, "What does your neighbor need?" All of the world's great religions say love your neighbor as yourself in some way or other. What does it mean for us to love

our neighbors, and what does it mean for us to love ourselves so we know how to love our neighbors? And what does it mean for us to be in love with the Holy Higher Power that we, the three of us, call God. But call it love, call it the universe, let's let love guide us is my desperate plea.

Richard Rohr: Beautiful. Thank you.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: You know, I confront what I know you all do, too, today, not just rejection and hatred of religion, but just it's beneath concern. Otherwise civil, educated, friendly people don't want God mentioned at their marriages or at their funerals. And the reason I bring that up here is if we were known for revealing these biases, that God knowledge had the ability to undercut our own biases, and we were really free thinking people, because so many people who call themselves free thinking are not, they're subject to these too. But if they could trust that these are liberated people, liberated from themselves, I don't know how else we're going to overcome this wholesale hatred of religion that is emerging in our country. I can totally understand it. I have to go along with them when, "Well, would you try not to talk about God?" at a funeral or a wedding. We're angry at this authoritarian, biased, God inserted into everything who now we know, just preserves us in our biases.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes.

Richard Rohr: And we don't have time for it anymore. So, thank you for allowing us to spend six whole sessions talking about this. [music] This is good stuff, if I can say so myself. It's excellent stuff.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you.

Brian McLaren: Well, it's been a pleasure being part of this conversation with you all. And I find myself imagining a kind of Ignatian practice of reading a Bible story by putting myself in the position of one of the characters. And I think of the story where there's a blind man by the side of the road, and he's calling out and everybody tells him to "Shut up! Shut up! Be quiet." And he's calling out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." And Jesus goes through the crowd and says, "What do you want me to do for you?" And he says, "I want to see." And I think if this is the heart cry of more and more people, "I want to see," I think that could be the beginning of each of us becoming a little crack that lets some light in.

Richard Rohr: Beautiful.

Jacqui Lewis: That's great, Brian. Thank you.

Richard Rohr: Thank you for letting us be a part of this. Good stuff.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, I'm so grateful.

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