

**ANOTHER  
NAME  
FOR EVERY  
THING**

with

**RICHARD ROHR**

Season 1, Episode 10

From Me to We

- Brie Stoner: Welcome to season one of Another Name for Every Thing with Richard Rohr exploring the core themes of his new book, *The Universal Christ*.
- Paul Swanson: As mentioned previously, this podcast is recorded on the grounds of the Center for Action and Contemplation and may contain the quirky sounds of our neighborhood and setting. We are your hosts. I'm Paul Swanson.
- Brie Stoner: And I'm Brie Stoner.
- Paul Swanson: We're staff members of the Center for Action and Contemplation and students of this contemplative path, trying our best to live the wisdom of this tradition amidst neighborhood dog's incessant barking, sleepless nights, and the shifting state of our world.
- Brie Stoner: This is the tenth of twelve weekly episodes. Today we will be discussing chapter 16 "Transformation and Contemplation." In this conversation, we explore the role of contemplation in rewiring us to be able to perceive and live from the Universal Christ.
- Paul Swanson: One more thing before we get started, Brie and I are having a blast being in conversation with Richard, and we would love to hear what questions are arising for you as you listened to this podcast or read the book. So, if you have a burning question related to the themes of *The Universal Christ* that just won't leave you alone. Head over to [cac.org/podcast](http://cac.org/podcast) and follow the instructions there to submit your question. After this season is over, we'll sift through the submissions, pour a glass, something tasty, ask Richard your questions, and then share his responses with all of you.
- Brie Stoner: Richard, today we wanted to talk about chapter 16 "Transformation and Contemplation." We're going to get right into the good stuff now. You start this chapter talking about the fact that the idea of a cosmic or universal Christ is really challenging for us because we're operating with the wrong software, to put it one way, sure. How, how would you describe our normal operating system and how contemplation can help update our software?
- Richard Rohr: Let's come at it with this angle. The normal way the self-enclosed person sees reality is "me" and "not me." And you can understand how a child is going to start that way, but what life is meant to do is to little by little dissolve those boundaries. That's the whole meaning of love. If you don't do that, everything's me and not me, there's really no mind to understand this unitive Christ concept, which is a "we" concept, a participatory concept. So, without major transformation, conversion, which is to overcome your
- Richard Rohr: separateness, I don't think the mind, the Western mind, the Eastern mind for that matter, is it all prepared to understand the Christ because what it is is a moving from "I" to "we," radical "we," that the ontological truth is connection. The psychological construct is self, is separate self. So, yeah, until those boundaries of self begin to dissolve, we are not prepared to understand the notion of Christ. It's just a theoretical, theological idea.
- Paul Swanson: The word "contemplation" is going to come up a lot, I imagine, in this conversation. How do you define that word so that all those listening can have a kind of a base-level understanding our starting point?
- Richard Rohr: You know, let's try this time, just the word itself. Its Latin root means to gaze at something,

and sometimes we still use the word “contemplate,” “I contemplated that.” But a gazing until you see the dignity of a thing, the soul of a thing, in a certain sense, the equality of a thing, that it’s part of the great chain of being just as much as I am. So again, we’re talking about dissolving of boundaries, which can only happen gradually and why it doesn’t happen so often, let’s say in your teens and twenties, and God certainly understands this, is you are trying, so feverously in your early years to create some skin in order to create some self, what I call the first half of life.

So, unless there’s been suffering, or great love that’s begun to dissolve those boundaries, most people in their teens and twenties just aren’t naturally contemplative. They can’t be. They’re still asserting, and they have to, their identity, their selfhood, their dignity, their importance. I mean, I certainly did that. I went off to a seminary and I put on a robe and became a priest and a Franciscan. That was all okay. But now I look back on it. It was grasping for a persona and this was one that seemed good. We all do that, and God loves that.

So, your question was, “How would I describe contemplation?” When you stop seeing things in what I call the “subject/object split,” and you began to read reality subject to subject, center to center, dignity to dignity, that’s a different way of seeing. It’s what we called yesterday, the “I-thou” instead “I-it.”

Paul Swanson: My next question is how has contemplation helped you expand the notion and relationship with Jesus and the Christ?

Richard Rohr: Well, what I think I experienced in my early God experiences, which were not always precisely Jesus, and I certainly wouldn’t have had the notion of Christ I have now as a young man, but what I felt was that subject-to-subject, center-to-center relationship being initiated from the other side. Do you understand? Someone is loving me, someone is allowing me, someone is choosing me. Now, the name I gave that someone was “God.” Now I could also call it Jesus or Christ, but I don’t need to, you understand? So, yeah, it was again, a dissolving of or a lessening, let’s not call it a dissolving of boundaries, because you always have boundaries or there isn’t an I-thou. There still has to be an “I” here or “thou” there.

Richard Rohr: As I would allow that to be dissolved in me, that’s what mercy, and forgiveness, and compassion does, when you experience God’s mercy towards you, you realize He is not holding me to my self-defining mistakes or my self-defining stupidities. He is dissolving them. She is dissolving them. Of course, it’s not a “he” at that point.

That’s all that comes right now. Okay.

Brie Stoner: Beatrice Bruteau talks about how the self is actually defined not by a sense of a noun, of what it possesses or what it has—

Richard Rohr: Oh, that’s good.

Brie Stoner: --but, rather, by its relationships. And what I’m thinking about as you’re saying this is that in a way the contemplative mind helps us see a web of relationality instead of focusing on just the part, which we get so stuck on normally.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Excellent. Excellent. And God must understand this because this is your audio receiver

station. And so, how I feel this morning naturally dominates the field. How can it not? What I'm thinking this morning is your beginning place. So, what you're doing in contemplation is lessening that reference point, lessening that perspective by allowing the self to expand. Again, I'm repeating myself, where you see reality through a radical connectedness. It's not just relationship, but it's the quality of your relationship, the trustfulness of it, the warmth of it, the trust of it. So, I think a lot of people have had a relationship with God, but you find out when you do spiritual direction, the God they had relationship with was toxic, was a torture. It was all fear based. So, you can't just say relationship, you have to say the quality of relationship. Now that, of course, brings me theologically back to the Trinity, that the quality of the relationship between the three is one of infinite self-emptying and infinite outpouring. If that's the template of reality, then all we can do is try to imitate that, try. We never succeed, of course.

Brie Stoner: So, would you say that a marker of a contemplative life is the outflow of that kind of Trinitarian creativity, generativity from love, not just for the sake of, you know, creating, but rather for the sake of giving, giving oneself

Richard Rohr: Yeah, giving. That's good. That's good. You know, the corrective that we often have to insert, and we're not trained to, as long as that self-giving is accompanied by self-emptying. So, not that you are saying that, but if it's all about my career, my creativity, my, that's all outpourings you could assume that it's divine, but it's only divine if when you aren't getting anything out of it—money, or fame, or admiration, and you still will give for the sake of somebody else or some other cause. You see why I get so excited about the notion of Trinity. And this is appropriately said on St. Valentine's Day, because, our notion of love is all about being outpoured toward and no accompanying notion of self-emptying. And I use the word self-emptying instead of sacrifice because the word sacrifice has been so polluted to just be another way to be egoic. "I'm sacrificial," so that didn't work.

So, it has to be self-emptying. A heroic sacrifice is very dangerous because it's usually still all about you, not all, but mostly, mostly about you. That's why Jesus said, "Go learn the meaning of the words. What I want is mercy, not sacrifice." He quotes that in several places this rather obscure passage in Hosea. I think that's very significant, because he was coming from a sacrificially based religion, as we do too.

Paul Swanson: This brings to mind, Richard, the first question I asked you in our first episode where I asked you, "How do you explain Christ to a child?" And as you're talking about self-emptying and self-giving, what comes to me now as I realize my intention with that question, although I didn't realize it, I read a passage later on the book, was that how I want to pass on this transformative nature of Christ. And then I read this, and I want to ask you a question after this.

Richard Rohr: Okay, go ahead.

Paul Swanson: From this chapter:

We can begin to understand that the Christ mystery is not something that we need

to prove or even can prove, but a broad field that we can recognize for ourselves when we see in a contemplative way, which often we see more symbolic and intuitive than merely rational.

And I think what took that breath away from for me when I read that was that I want my kids to be Christians in this way, but I no longer need to have that be the label they were. Is that ringing true for how we can pass this on by just kind of helping the next generation see the field, the Christ mystery field, but not always having to force it into the box of naming it in religious categories?

Richard Rohr: I hear you, and it's a question a parent wants to ask. Again, it has to be a both/and answer. Don't be so eager to make sure they're into the universal Christ that you don't give them a gateway. I, in one place in the book, I call Jesus like a shortcut on your computer screen. I'm not saying he is the only way, but he is a good, a really good shortcut. If you have a proper understanding of Jesus, he's a very good shortcut.

So, know that a small child cannot easily think conceptually, universally. It's the scandal of the particular. We start with the concrete. We move to the universal normally. And it's the same way in pedagogy, a little child most easily, I'm not saying only, but most easily, probably needs to look upon a Jesus figure, or some other Hindu figure, I don't care, but something that communicates outpouring love for them, that pulls them into a world of safety, and security, and dignity.

I think we have to keep saying dignity because what we saw in the way so many of us were raised is this God didn't really give us dignity. He/She was always taking—well, it was “He” then—was always taking it away: “You're a sinner. You're inadequate. You're unworthy.” That's no small point. When your God is not giving you dignity, well, then, it's no surprise we grew up taking away other people's dignity, because God did. A good preacher gave a fire-and-brimstone sermon, and that's what Christians even came to

Richard Rohr: expect, to be reminded on Sunday morning of their sinfulness. Talk about a negative agenda.

Brie Stoner: And their powerlessness.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: There's a lack of agency of participation,

Richard Rohr: Very good. Yes. Am I answering your question? All right.

Paul Swanson: What I hear you saying is that we need to, one, ground the next generation in the image and likeness of God that that is a given, that the image is given under the, the likeness, is the path and that the gateway needs to be so personal to be cosmic.

Richard Rohr: Where the heart and soul space isn't open. You know, it's like what your first girlfriend or first boyfriend does for you. It opens up a space inside of you that you didn't know was there. And that's why a loving God image does the same thing, opens up a huge

space inside of you that is so huge, of course you don't know this at first, but it has the power to include everything else. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: I think one of the things we struggle with though, Paul, and I don't know if you feel this way, as parents, is that so much of how that particular personhood of Jesus is packaged is so negative, you know, and it's unhealthy. There's an unhealthy relationship to culture, to context, that we've sort of interpreted Jesus in such a different way than even, you know, he likely was in his own life. And so, one of the things that I find myself doing, or trying, is from my own life, stories and literature played a huge role in actually creating a better picture of anthropology than the scriptures did; a better image for what the human journey can look like. You know, I think of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and George McDonald and now I'm deep in Harry Potter land right now with the kids.

Richard Rohr: Are you?

Brie Stoner: There's beautiful symbolism in it.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes, if you're ready to see it.

Brie Stoner: And so, I think you're ready to see it. Right. What I appreciate about what you're saying is that the personal has a place and giving our kids an actual story, of personal stories, of lives lived in the service of something greater like Jesus did, is part of creating that, neural pathway, I guess to put it one way, toward the cosmic, but that we don't need to expect or maybe we can't expect to be able to engender the cosmic in everything right now. That's helpful.

Richard Rohr: I wonder if the parent's actions, behavior doesn't communicate the Christ part, you don't have to do it verbally, but when they see that you don't put down black people, that you don't make fun of gay people, that you don't eliminate other Christians, they're

Richard Rohr: getting the meaning of Jesus in a universal sense. You don't have to give it to them doctrinally. They're going to watch your behavior. So, I agree with everything you just said. You know I've been saying lately, because someone who's been training us here in management organization—I don't know if the quote is exact. Maybe you can correct it.—"When culture meets religion, culture wins every time." Is that close to the quote?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: I don't think we knew how true that was, you know, that again and again it wasn't the gospel is the way we had already framed reality.

Richard Rohr: When I talk in the book about Carl Young being very disappointed in his father and his five, five pastor uncles, and he looked at all of them and saw sour, unhappy human beings, very, very disciplinarian like, policemen more than pastors. The culture had won. I am not anti-Swiss. I taught in Switzerland many times, but you can definitely see it's a culture where law, and order, and discipline and probably, historically, very strong, punitive patterns of child rearing were the order of the day. Now, if that's the frame peace is achieved in our house by daddy whipping us, peace is achieved in our house by mother yelling at us, do you see how if that's your emotional frame, you transfer all of that to church, and you even expect that?

I'm not trying to be anti the reform tradition, but I remember when I was in Geneva going to the church where John Calvin in his older years, he would attend, and his chair was still there in the sanctuary next to whoever the preacher was. He wasn't the preacher anymore, but he would sit there with this whip. The whip had to be 10 feet tall.

Brie Stoner: I can't believe it.

Richard Rohr: And if anybody fell asleep in the church—

Brie Stoner: Oh my gosh.

Richard Rohr: It's still there! Oh my god. I'm not putting a Calvin down, but it's all moral behavior. It's not grace. It's not compassion because God, you know, I mean the substitutionary penal, penal, punitive, substitutionary atonement theory, okay, the word I'm told came from that tradition. They did many good things. Please don't hear me trying to be oppositional, but like the Catholic Church itself, they did many bad things too. And what history is forcing on us is to own that both/and character of almost everything.

Paul Swanson: And Jung, I mean, since you invoked his name, I'm just thinking of how he overcame even being able to see the, the path of dissent or the the resurrection journey as the map, right?

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Paul Swanson: And so, what I hear you saying, too, is if we can give children that map through Jesus then they see that that map actually applies to everything.

Brie Stoner: Everywhere.

Richard Rohr: There you go. That's very good.

Paul Swanson: I just wanted to close that loop.

Brie Stoner: Parents everywhere are dying, like, "What do we do?"

Richard Rohr: For some reason, this idea of a map makes sense to people as a replacement for the automaton savior who will take us to heaven. That's what's falling apart. It just doesn't make sense.

Brie Stoner: That's right. And it's helpful because that's how you frame Christ as this pattern of all reality, so then we can see it everywhere, and we can experience it everywhere. But I'm realizing as you're describing this kind of transactionalism in religion and in the Christian religion, how much a product of our binary minds that is and how inadequate that kind of transactional mentality is to deal with mystery such as love and suffering. I want to read this line where you say, "The binary mind, good for rational thinking, finds itself totally out of its league in dealing with things like love, death, suffering, infinity, God, sexuality, or mystery in general." And you often say that our gateways to transformation are great love and great suffering. Is that because those experiences short circuit that tendency to try to turn everything into a binary transaction?

Richard Rohr: I'm going to quote you on that. I love your use of the term "short circuit," because that's

exactly what they do. When you're in the middle of great love, great suffering, the binary mind isn't helpful, isn't useful, it's like regressing. So, the trouble is, as you've heard me say that wonderful, temporary, unitive consciousness that you don't even know you're enjoying temporarily, you're just enjoying it, but you don't stand back enough to know, "I'm thinking unitively right now," it usually cannot be maintained. In fact, I'm going to say it never can be maintained. You will always slip back the next morning into the first thing that irritates you, or your old resentments toward this person, or whatever it might be.

No, that is very well said. So, if I don't say it that way, and that's not the only reason I'm saying it, but we don't have a natural religion that was available to the Stone Age people to the Mayans, to the Celts, to the Babylonians, but great love and great suffering were available to all human beings, maybe in a rudimentary way by a Stone Age person, I don't know what their level of consciousness was, but they're seeking to take care of their little babies. They're sticking together with one another through tremendous hardship. That was their path to God, and suddenly, you know, it's one coherent universe.

We're still, you know, millennia later trying to learn how to do great love and great suffering. And I would go so far as to say those are the only real messages religion has how to do love and death or suffering. When we're not talking about those two, we're not talking. So, I'm afraid that I'm over-using the terms, but it removes us from automatic, heavenly transactions that we're supposed to believe to a path where we

Richard Rohr: really change at a cellular level, at a mental level. We process reality differently if we can maintain what we momentarily experienced in great love and great suffering. And that, as you know, is the only function of practices. If we don't say that then, dang it, practices become another technique, an end in themselves, do you understand?

I remember when I went to a Japanese Zen monastery, the moment I sat down the abbot leaned forward and asked, "And what is your practice?" I'm not trying to put him down, but I talk about it in the book how different that is from a Catholic monastery where the monks say, "Did they serve you lunch?"

So, we all have our limits, I guess, but I just want to say that so we who teach contemplation don't make our preferred little method—and we Catholics did this with attending Mass every day, and it's made saints of many Catholics, but it's also become a catatonic repetition of words and formulas that precisely keep people at a lower level of love. It's just to keep reasserting how holy they are. It's still all about them, as we say, And that's the danger of any transaction. You used the wonderful word before "agency." I'm still the agent and I'm choosing to go to Mass to prove to God my worthiness, which you already had before you went to Mass, you see?

Brie Stoner: One of the things that I appreciate about what you're saying is that if we do have these kind of peak experiences of great love or great suffering and feel that the veil parts, we feel the interconnectedness of love in all things, and yet you're saying that the goal of practice then is to habituate ourselves to that.

Richard Rohr: Perfect. Good word.

To help re wire us to that reality without turning the practice into the new thing that we're



overly worshiping.

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's what we're saying.

Brie Stoner: But I think it's helpful—and I guess this is a question that I have is—you know, discipline is important—

Richard Rohr: Yep. Take me there. Take me there.

Brie Stoner: --and there is a place for that. So, what is the right relationship between practice and discipline? Because I find that a lot of us, especially in the millennial generation, we want the goods without the work.

Richard Rohr: Resist the discipline.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. We want the consciousness without the time, and the practice, and the discipline and the years of commitment to get us there.

Richard Rohr: That's very true. Yeah. You know, I just gave this retreat for a whole bunch of Franciscans who are forming our new, one, national province. And there was a

Richard Rohr: beautiful, nature-based chapel on the grounds of the retreat house where you could look out through the big glass windows at the trees. And several times in the middle of the day when I'd go over there for several different reasons, I would see one or the other of the old friars just sitting in that chapel, and I knew they were beneficiaries of years of discipline, just sitting there. I didn't check out how long they stayed there, but I know there are friars who their opinion is without one full hour a day of prayer, you can't live the Christian life in any depth. And now we've lessened it to twenty minutes in our sit, you know?

But isn't that beautiful? And when I first joined the Franciscans, a novice in 1961, we had to be in the chapel, I guess it was six o'clock, and the first half hour we had to spend on our knees, the chapel was still largely dark, in total silence. Now the trouble is no one was teaching us what to do with our mind, just kneel in the dark in silence. Well, the wonderful thing is many good things happened, it did for me, during that very period. UI don't think it did for everybody though. For many, it became an obedience, not an inner experience, something they had to do.

Did I answer your question? What did you say?

Brie Stoner: Yeah, you're getting there, just what is a healthy relationship to discipline? We almost want to throw that away, but I feel that the monastic traditions gave us such a good model. There is a role for it. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: There is a place for it. So, maybe it's just important that we say that, and that you say it as a millennial, to recognize it isn't the virtue of most younger people, to be honest. Like if it was enforced on me at nineteen for a whole year, I wouldn't have ever had that, but I had to be there. I would get whipped. No, but I would have been disciplined. "Richard, you weren't—" Do you know what my name was then? Alexander. "Alexander, you weren't at prayer this morning." We used to be given new names. The day we'd received the robe, you're

kneeling there, it was the middle of August, terribly hot. We had to wear these black suits. We'd come in and, and he says, "Henceforth you will be named—" and you're just like, "Oh God, I hope I don't get a crazy name."

Brie Stoner: This is like the sorting hat in Hogwarts for those that are as deep into Harry Potter land as I am, where the hat decides what house you go into.

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's a wonderful connection. But, "—you'll be known as Friar Alexander." Oh my God. I guess that's okay. Do I like that? So, I take my clothes off and they put my robe over me, and it's so exciting, terribly hot, but there was a discipline in that world that has served me well for the rest of my life where you internalize the discipline. Now, I wouldn't be tied to the formulas of doing it the first thing in the morning, or being on my knees, or being a full half hour. And that's the real goal, for virtues to be internalized so you don't need the external coercion or the social pressure, but you just internally recognize, "No, I need to ask this of myself, or give myself in this way." So, thanks for bringing it up.

Brie Stoner: It keeps us honest it sounds like. It keeps us in an honest relationship where the inner matches the outer.

Richard Rohr: Oh, very good. Yeah. Nice.

Brie Stoner: I think of older values like building character, how much do we really talk about that now, and yet I feel like character, discipline, the fruits of the spirit, these are all things that kind of flow together. Thank you for answering that question. The relationship to discipline for me, I can tip into a perfectionism where I'm like, "Oh, look how good I am. I did my double twenty-minute sit."

Richard Rohr:

The ego will do that even when you don't want it to.

Brie Stoner: Sure. But that kind of humility of honesty feels like a helpful way to—

Richard Rohr: "I'm becoming sort of soft and flabby. I need to pull myself a little together." Yeah. Yeah. And that isn't said judgmental way to the self, just to a growing way. I want to be all I can be for the sake of the world, for the sake of God. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: And part of what you're using in that discipline is it frees you from the rigidity of it, but it also grounded you in something to return to. And I think about how you say in the book, that I'm still on the theme of great love and great suffering, as those great teachers that we are able to go with to the depths of spiritual things. And then the practice you name is kind of this daily bread that we must return to, and there's the discipline aspect of that. How has that daily bread helped sustain you during those seasons of great suffering? Just to put a little kind of flesh on this conversation, if anything comes to mind,

Richard Rohr: This is going to sound like such a stock answer, but even this morning, I just thank God for how lucky I am to have been given this one reference point, this one center. And I said, "How do people live without you?" Not in a patronizing way, but I found myself feeling sorry for the millions of people who must be waking up this morning with no ultimate

purpose for the day. Now, maybe I was over-taught ultimate purpose, but when I see the vacillating, whimsical personality we've created in Western civilization, where there really does seem to be no ground, and no center, and no goal. That's what philosophically we call "nihilism." Nihil is the Latin word for nothing nothingness.

Richard Rohr: I'm not trying to put such people down. I really say that with great sympathy. How do you wake up each day and create a meaning, and a purpose, and a goal for yourself by yourself? What else can you go toward except money, and success, and power? I would too. There's nothing else to get me through the day except getting a raise, you know, having a sexual encounter, or being important. So, you can see why all religious traditions call those "passions." They don't upset God, they just keep you from God, because they're false gods. And so, if you worship them, you don't have the true center, you have a false center that will not really satisfy, will not really feed the soul or the body for that matter.

Brie Stoner: You talk about in your book the fact that reality isn't what changes. In other words, that the core of what is really there is, has always really, really been there but rather how we perceive what is real. And you use the word "epistemology." What are some of the changes then—and I know we're kind of circling around this—but what are some of the changes in our perception when we are looking through that Christ lens or that contemplative mind, what do we see?

Richard Rohr: The self in a certain, real sense doesn't die, it disappears. And what I mean by disappears, it's still there, but it doesn't frame the moment, you know? And so, you can see things in themselves, as themselves, for themselves, and by themselves in their inherent goodness, and you're free enough from weighing your own goodness to genuinely enjoy—enjoy is the word I want to use—the inherent goodness of really almost anything. A twig, if you contemplate it, which means to look at it until you can appreciate it, you gaze at it until it becomes beautiful. You look at it until it shows its inherent worthiness. Apart from that it's going to make me money are, you know, allow me firewood for tonight. All of those might be okay, but the contemplative mind moves beyond that. And so, you see how this destroys all attempts to manipulate reality.

It's been disappointing me over the years, I guess because I became fairly well known at one point, that there were a number of people that entered into my life that only years later did I grossly discover that I was being used for their own personal advancement. Oh, that was like a knife in the heart, you know. I don't want to hate them for it, but I just realized that was their whole approach to life. We call it opportunism. Everything is opportunistic, even friendship, even a relationship is, well, to get close to Richard Rohr they thought, it really isn't, is going to get me somewhere. We almost all have to be purified of that manipulative, opportunistic level of motivation, which we all start with.

I'm just amazed at how it maintains itself in our culture. That, you know, we could have a president, excuse me, who seems to know no worldview beyond winning. He turns everything back, everything, and I'm not exaggerating, to winning or losing. That's the hell of the self as an absolute reference point. There is no other meaning than winning or losing, and that isn't even an exaggeration. And he surrounded his entire office with similar people.

Brie Stoner: It's like a whole worldview of "I-it," right?

Richard Rohr: That's right. Excellent. Everyone is objectified. That's why they're all betraying one another and stabbing one another in the back. That's why you almost have to feel sorry for these rigid personalities. I see it in new reforms in Christianity. If it's a real rigid, dualistic founder, you wait one generation, and they'll be eating one another alive. That is no reform. It's no renewal. You start with a dualistic revolution or reform and just give it five years, and it's the same damn thing—I use the word intentionally—all over.

I was in Nicaragua in 1985 in the middle of the Sandinista Revolution. I was in the front row with Peter, Paul and Mary. Well, I was singing from the pew, I wasn't joining them on stage, obviously.

Paul Swanson: Peter, Paul, Mary and Richard.

Richard Rohr: [laughter] But even while we were there, we were beginning to see—and I had the Sandinistas on a huge pedestal of, “This is reform.” And even as I got to meet several of the inner circle, the junta, they call it? Yeah. Several of them were very disillusioning to me. We said this is not going to be a long-term reform. One took me out to his beautiful art-covered mansion on the edge of Managua, and he's talking about the poor, and he is already living, you know, top of the pile. I'm just, I guess, rambling, but if you don't have a real change of consciousness, you normally repeat, in a different mask, the same thing you came to reform. Why don't we see that at this point in history? And as you know, that's why I can't give up on religion, because it still keeps wanting to radically reform, not just being a leftist, not just being a revolutionary, a socialist. It doesn't work; doesn't work.

Paul Swanson: And you're naming the almost inability for the contemplative mind be power grabbing, right, because it sees that there's a bigger picture beyond that. When you talked about in your book about the sorted past of Christianity and all the trauma it's created, but yet your ability to stay within the Church and work towards reconciliation, integration, and forgiveness. How has the contemplative mind allowed you or created the space for you to accept the history of Christianity and still have a foot inside of it?

Richard Rohr: You know, that's only worked for me in my fully adult years. What held me in, in my early years was that I was lucky enough, as I think you also were, to have an original, youthful, very positive experience of Catholicism. Really, there is such a thing. I think you added in evangelicalism. Why would I want to reject my beautiful Catholic boyhood, you know?

I love the title of Caryll Houselander's book that I begin with, *A Rocking Horse Catholic*. She already in the thirties recognized that you got to go back and forth on this rocking horse, which gives away that Caryll Houselander had a nondual mind, although she would've never used that term in the 1930s, I guess. So, I have a positive early experience of Christianity to hold me, to harken back to. I don't need to react against it even though by today's criteria—I'm going to use a harsh word—so much of it was garbage, but that's only by today's criteria. So much of what was, in effect, anti-Protestant, very white bourgeois, not upper-class bourgeois but lower-class bourgeois, nevertheless the same. But that's not fair to judge the past which worked for you as a little ten-year-old boy by what I know now at seventy-six. And so, to accept myself and my worldview now does demand conscious, nondual perception, but I didn't need nondual perception.

Now, that's not true anymore. You who were born into disorder, born into criticism, dismissal, chaos, and cynicism, I'm still not sure how it's going to play out with all of you, because where do you learn nondual consciousness when there's so much not to forgive, or that seems unworthy of forgiveness, or has to be named, has to be blamed. So, I think it's going to be a harder path.

Richard Rohr: Now, again, you had good families and a good beginning, but the amount of young people today who are growing up in chaos and total cynicism from both parents, wow, I don't know. I don't know because what I usually find them doing is they're so desperate for order by the age of thirty, that they manufacture, order and revolve their whole world around one thing like tattoos. I'm not against tattoos, but I'd meet people at the jail, and that's all they could talk about. That was their frame of reference. If you do not discover true transcendence, you will become transcendental about something that isn't transcendent.

We have a member on our staff who says his father is just obsessed with guns, collecting them, naming them, using them, comparing his guns to other people's guns. Is that the meaning of life? You will create a center point. You will, if you don't find a real center point. You have to do it for mental coherence or you go crazy with your bobbing mind. So, that's why, thank God for showing herself to me, that I was given a transcendent reference point that is worthy of the name, that is really transcendent and not just guns or tattoos. Or the Republican party, or the Democratic party, let's be honest, that is the dueling religion in America today. It's not Catholic, Protestant, it's Republican, Democrat, and people hold on to those political labels that are constantly in flux with the rigidity that we used to be Catholic or Protestant, which was equally stupid. But the dualistic mind will always re-find itself, re-find itself, to give itself false comfort on one side.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. Wow.

Richard Rohr: Darn it!

Paul Swanson: It's such a small North Star.

Richard Rohr: "Such a small North Star." Very good. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: I want to have you read a passage, if I can find it. So, it's this passage right here. Okay. That section.

Richard Rohr: All right. This is on page 206.

Frankly, a new humility is emerging in Christianity as we begin to recognize our many major mistakes in the past, especially our tragic treatment of indigenous people in almost all the nations that Christians colonized,--

And that is not an exaggeration. There's no European country that can say, "We didn't do it." They all did it.

--along with our silence about and full complicity with slavery—

Slavery! Talk about the ultimate "I-it" relationship. You know, there's no contemplation left

when you have slaveholder religion.

Richard Rohr: --destructive consumerism, apartheid, white privilege, the devastation of the planet itself, homophobia, classism, and [of course] the Holocaust.

You know, as a German, I always take note of the Holocaust because this is my ethnic race. And if you've ever been to Germany, there are beautiful churches in every town. And there's Lutheran academies and Catholic seminaries in every other town. And yet twice in a fifty-year period, I don't even need to say it, and they know this. How could Christianity be so wrong? I'm preaching now, I'm sorry. Back to the paragraph.

Our dualistic logic allowed us to justify almost anything the corporate ego desired.

If the corporate ego wanted to Germany to rule the world, forget about Jesus.

Now we are a little less arrogant about our ability to understand—much less to actually live—this 'one true religion' of ours.

That's the phrase we grew up with, "Were you the one, true religion?" That was a Catholic phrase.

Brie Stoner: Basically, the Baptists were the one, true—

Richard: Oh, you were? Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I thought that my little Swedish Covenant denomination was the one, true religion.

Richard Rohr: Yes. And the thing is, it was not one, it was partial in all three cases. The way that word "one" was used by the early fathers meant "unitive," "of the whole," "catholic," in that sense.

And our critics are not about to let us forget our past mistakes.

So, we're stuck with them forever. Anybody can Google. Anybody can read a history book.

The harsh judgements of humanity against the actual performance of Christianity are with us for the rest of history.

Oh, my heart just sinks because I don't want to have to be an apologist for the rest of history. I want to get onto the positive, visionary message, you know? But I know a lot of young Catholic priests who almost their most exciting course in the seminary is apology, "Catholic Apologetics." It's from the first word, it's a defensive posture and ending up being a very offensive posture. Why we Catholics alone are the One True Church.]

All people need to do is Google, and they will know what really seems to have happened.

Richard Rohr: So now we have no choice about integrating the shadow. We have no choice.

Brie Stoner: But that, to me is so refreshing that humility that you're describing there to look at the whole and say, "Yeah, we've really, you know, misinterpreted our own, heritage of our founding teacher, Jesus. We've really screwed this up in a lot of different ways and your ability to name

our collective complicity in that—

Richard Rohr: That's a good word.

Brie Stoner: --is so refreshing. And I want to know how does contemplation help create the space for us to both see our suffering, the collective suffering, our role in it, and still the hope at the same time of moving forward, as you're naming it?

Richard Rohr: What's taken away from you in the contemplative mind is the need to blame, the need to accuse. I'm sure you've been told the very word *satan* means "the accuser." When you don't need to scapegoat and to find out who the bad guys are, and to pretend you have localized evil, that's the illusion, "I have localized evil," you know, and it's whatever, like the Taliban are saying, "It's soft Islam. Soft Islam is the problem. So in the name of our hard interpretation of Islam, we're going to destroy one after the other Islamic city" Talk about being counterproductive to your own people. It just gets stupider and stupider. I don't think that's a word, but once you don't need to blame, once you don't need to scapegoat and localize evil elsewhere, I can't exaggerate what a freedom that is. It's an entirely different mind, when you don't even need to do it with the car in front of you that is going too slow, or whatever it is.

I'm not saying I don't get upset at such things, too, but there are people who really get upset at it, you know, almost ram you because you're not going fast enough. There's the need for my inner anger to be expressed. But it never occurs to them that I, in my slow car, maybe occasioned the anger, but I didn't cause it. You were an angry person before you pulled up right behind my car and then I brought it out of you. That's what the nonviolent teachers like Gandhi and Martin Luther King really brought to human awareness, and why they would do provocative things in Alabama and Mississippi to reveal what was already in Alabama and Mississippi before they came. But nonseeing people blame them for it. Yeah. "You caused the violence." "No, I provoked it." God, why can't people see that? It's a seeing that seems to be a gift from God to recognize the hidden nature of sin, the hidden nature of evil in the egoic self, and in egoic structures maybe even more so.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. Well, I think you're naming it. It's that we don't like to see it in ourselves. We don't want to see it in ourselves.

Richard Rohr: I don't. I want to be a good boy.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. But I appreciate that passage, and in this book, the way you describe contemplation as what frees us, frees us, to actually see our part, our complicity. We are part of this great system. We can't scapegoat anymore. We have to own it so that we can become free of it. And that, that participatory liberation is so exciting.

Richard Rohr: Well, it is, if we would have seen the life of Jesus, and the cross in particular, as God's giant act of absolute solidarity with the human situation—hold onto that word *solidarity*—then it's just, as you said, it's not anything else than agreeing to be in solidarity with the evil of the world, with the suffering of the world, instead of seeking a pure pedestal of superiority. And that's what all Christianity seemed to think it needed to do. And you still see it in the arguments of politicians, each trying to find their moral high ground by different criteria, but both wanted to be pure and perfect when you and I both know they're not. You're

fighting a feudal game that you are not complicit in the evil of America, but it's only the Democrats who are? You just want to say, "Oh, stop it." That's really stupidity. Or the Republicans, it doesn't matter.

Paul Swanson: I'm going to jump here, Richard, to what you teach at the Living School for Action Contemplation, our flagship program here, of what you teach students during their first onsite intensive with you during their first year, which you call your methodology—

Richard Rohr: Methodology, is that what you said?

Paul Swanson: Yeah, methodology. —of experienced scripture and tradition? Can you just give a kind of brief description of why it's so important for folks to understand as they begin this work on this resurrection journey?

Richard Rohr: Yeah. This is what I start with the very first day, "What is our methodology? By what authority does Richard say the things he says? Who do you think you are, a man of minimal intelligence in the United States of America, white, privileged cleric? Unless I can know that what I'm saying is not my own, not my own, but I am communicating from a larger lineage that was punctuated again and again and again. Now that's what we call the Perennial Tradition.

So, the words that were fought about so much in Christian history were scripture or tradition, endlessly. And, of course, good old Luther comes along, sola scriptura, "only scripture," and we good Catholics fought him back and in effect said, "only tradition." "What we have done in the past is the way we always will and always should be, and so forth. That became the usual law of two, endless argument that goes nowhere. And the evangelicals dug their heels more into sola scriptura, which created, frankly, modern fundamentalism, because if you think you could only prove things by a line from the Bible, your bandwidth of available authority and source for truth is so narrow. It's just, my God, you're going to create anti-intellectual people—I don't know what else to say—unthinking people. By the same token, if you Catholics keep thinking tradition is the way you did it in Portugal, or the way you did it in the Netherlands when you were growing up the 1940s, that's not tradition, that's custom, and we confuse custom with tradition.

That was our Catholic sin. So, what neither group recognized, and this might be the important insight that the students almost just seem to nod whenever I say it, is that neither the Catholic school or the Protestant school recognize that they were using scripture and using tradition through their personal experience, but didn't have the honesty, or the tools, to recognize that, the filters to recognize. Okay, you're saying sola scriptura, but it's through the Spanish culture's interpretation of scripture, or whatever culture it might be. So that's why I call it the tricycle, our methodology, and I deliberately, intentionally—I hope correctly—make experience the front wheel of the tricycle, because experience is going to be what you rely on anyway. And let's start admitting it, let's start being honest about it, that we interpret scripture, we interpret tradition, through our limited cultural, intellectual, psychological personality.

Richard Rohr: What else can you do? And God is humble enough to deal with that. So, I can almost feel the relief in the room when you say that to students. But see, I've got to emphasize, we



weren't taught that. We Catholics were told not to trust our experience, even though we did anyway, but to trust the pope's experience, or the bishop, or the priest. It was all top-down. Protestants, starting strongly with Luther, when you say sola scriptura, that's a basis for dualistic thinking. You're being taught dualism, "Don't look at tradition. There is no Perennial Tradition. There's only the isolated believer with his little Bible." And so, there's some truth that, not an entire truth, but that Protestantism was the birth of individualism, because "I didn't need community. All I needed was me and my Bible and my sola scriptura text.

So, once we have the tools, as we do now, for allowing you to filter, to process your own experience by things like spiritual direction, therapy, psychology, spiral dynamics, the Enneagram, the Myers-Briggs personality profile. I mean, you all have ten filters by which you can say, "Okay, maybe this isn't pure experience, this is my experience." Now we can put experience back on the front wheel. Then I find that experience, well filtered, can carry scripture and tradition. And the three, in the long run, the three wheels balance, checkout, you know, self-correct one another. And I think it gives you a very good basis for truth, spiritual truth. I'm not talking about medical truth. And that's a distinction we didn't often make, spiritual truth. All right? That spiritual truth, if it's not just yours and your filter is critiqued, it is constantly in dialogue with the Judeo-Christian scriptures and also honest enough about the whole tradition. So, you've been in the class, well, both of you have where I give you that diagram of the river. A lot of people have never seen the whole river. All they saw was the little Calvinist reform in the 16th century, which was good, but it's too small. It's too small a pond. It's not the big ocean, so it doesn't throw out Calvinism, or Lutheranism, or Catholicism for that matter. But what we Catholics didn't have the honesty to recognize is that we were only half, that we had excommunicated the Eastern Church. So all of us made the same mistake. We substituted our part for the whole.

Now in sympathy, they didn't have access to the whole the way we do today. So I can't hate him and think they were all stupid. They didn't have Google. [laughter]

Brie Stoner: It's interesting. Two points: One, is that we do tend to substitute the part for the whole.

Richard Rohr: We do.

Brie Stoner: In other words, we project our experience, or our lens, onto the whole thing. The other thing that I appreciate about your methodology, Richard, is that it's a tricycle is in motion. It's in motion.

Richard Rohr: Very good. Thanks for saying that.

Brie Stoner: So, we're evolving. So, the big "T" tradition, you know, we're always gaining greater and greater perspective on what that big "T" tradition is.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Brie Stoner: And so, one of the things that you bring up in this book is the work of Barbara Holmes, whom we love so much here at the center—we're so grateful for her—and how her work elucidates contemplation with a greater perspective, right, then we're typically used to in our kind of white, ethnocentric focus. And she talks about contemplation as including moaning,

and singing, and crisis contemplation. So, she's bringing us into a bigger picture, a bigger "I" tradition. How has she impacted you and your own views of contemplation?

Richard Rohr: I think the work of Barbara Holmes has been one of the greater breakthroughs in the evolution of teaching here at CAC. And it was you, Paul, who gave me the book. I think you put it on my desk. Thank you, because I hadn't heard of Barbara. But as soon as I began to read it, I said, "This is true. This is what I'm trying to say in my own feeble way by great love and great suffering." And now she brings a to an ethnic foundation that I suddenly could see that our definition of contemplation was too monastic, was too white-celibate European and too Buddhist, not to put down any of those groups.

But to have a black woman from the African experience-- You know, when this has often hit me over the years, hit me again when I taught in Africa, I love to have Mass in these little African churches where the whole thing starts with everybody marching up the aisle in perfect symmetry. How do they do that? We could not do it. And the whole Mass goes on and when one starts moving, they all move together. Do you see how we've got a collective "we" already shown in their body? And so, dancing, moaning in the slave hold, ships coming across the Middle Passage where they couldn't even understand one another's language because they were from different tribes. Can you imagine the torture of that, chained for weeks? I don't know if they force fed them, or if they fed them at all. We know many died, but what we're told in historical accounts is they began to moan together: God, collective, collective suffering. This is the image of the cross in space and time. God was in solidarity with that, and they were in solidarity with God as soon as the "I" became a "we." The "I" is too small to know God.

So, anything that moves you to a "we" is the beginnings of contemplation, and I think that's what Barbara Holmes is teaching, giving it the name of "crisis contemplation," that often it takes a crisis to recognize your radical solidarity with your family, with your partner, with your children, with whatever it might be. So, she's been a great gift. And the CAC, if I dare say it, is in a unique position to integrate this teaching because we're not monastic based. As a Franciscan I say, "My God, this is why Francis said don't speak to me of Benedict." He wasn't against the Benedictines, but he knew that was too ordered a model. It was too based on order, and Francis could deal with disorder. So he sent us into the streets of the city and the wilds of nature, and those were our monasteries—the streets of the city and the wilds of nature. So, I quickly, I don't mean to pull everything into my ambit, but I could see that crisis contemplation is, frankly,

Richard Rohr: much more of the Franciscan tradition. So, I just bought it without any hesitation. Then when I met Barbara herself and was able to have a little, more than a little, private time sharing together, what I could easily discern was a woman who was radically God-centered. It was not intellectual belief. She knew God. As arrogant as that sounds, she knew God.

Brie Stoner: No, it's that elder energy. And the other marker that I think is interesting about how you frame contemplation here at the center and also in the book is that it's incarnate. In other words, it's embodied, you cannot just see it, but you can feel it in the energy of a person for whom this is a lifelong pursuit.

Paul Swanson: Richard, one of things you bring up in this chapter is that death that we're not speaking of

death avoided, but death transformed, the practice of dying before you die.

Richard Rohr: That's pivotal.

Paul Swanson: And this has been such a big part of my own contemplative journey is the gratitude that can arise for life when I ponder my own death, that this is not a dress rehearsal for anything and this is it, right? How has that practice of dying before you die, what does that look like for you and what does that bring into your own sense of embodiment and participation in mystery?

Richard Rohr: You know, any kind of dying is never invited in. First of all, it's forced on you. You know what I can think of as a little boy just hating to get up on a winter morning and go to school. Do you understand? "Oh, man, do I have to do this?" And I was a good little boy, but still, once you're under the covers and it's cold. But I realize now that what was first imposed by "You have to get up. You have to go to school." "Okay." I didn't think about God very much, but law is probably the first imposition of death upon you. "No, you must do this for your sisters and brothers, for your mommy and daddy." Okay. I'll do it to conform and to keep from punishment." But then, oh gosh, when does it morph into recognizing that this ability to let go of your own willfulness, to let go of your own need?

I can remember, you know, I went to the seminary already at fourteen, so a bunch of strong-willed, macho, fourteen-year-old boys—I wasn't macho, but a lot of them were—all being very willful, and wanting to win, and wanting to be the smartest boy in class that then I just in inkling ways began to recognize the only way community is ever going to happen in this place is I have to decide real early not to always have my way, or not to always be right, or it's always be first. So, it morphed a little farther into choice-fulness, into consciousness. Then when I was pastor of the lay community in Cincinnati, the New Jerusalem, I spent half of most working days just doing counseling, marriage counseling, counseling about all the problems young people have, and it struck me that almost all the problems were the self-wanting to force itself on the situation, on the marriage, on another person.

So, what I learned, I hope those good examples, that in each case it was a letting go of the way I saw it, the way I preferred it, the way I wanted it, to allow the perspective of another person. But every time, and still to this day, that feels like dying. It feels unfair.

Richard Rohr: "Dang it! Why do I have to give up?" It feels almost wrong. "Well, I'm a person. I have rights too." And if you give into those voices too quickly, you'll never surrender your ego boundaries. Yes, there is a self that as a right to protect itself, but don't start with that all the time. You know, because she's a self too. And even little children are a self. And that's the beautiful thing about parents like you, I think for the first time in history, we have parents who've been able to recognize that child has a selfhood, that I don't have the right to manipulate, you understand, that I don't have the right to force. What an evolution of consciousness that is, that you don't own your children. "Yes, I do. I created them." "Well, not really. You just waited for nine months, and God created them, and gave them to you." I know that's a religious way of talking, but just know that all letting go will always feel like dying.

Now, once you see that the practice in fact widens your field, widens the capacity for

communion and community, it's much easier for me to trust at my age now. I mean, to bring it home, as you know, I'm called the founder of this place, but I really have very little to say about it, and that's fine. That's as it should be. And there are things that are happening that I just have to look the other way. I just have to bite my tongue. What!?! You know, it's just so different than my worldview would have once said. But I've learned, and I mean this sincerely, that by getting out of the way and biting your tongue and not assuming your perspective is the best, I've learned so much by not insisting on my way.

So, those are just silly but I think real examples of dying before you die, but you do have to do it enough to see that it's actually to your advantage and to the advantage of the group, whether it's a bigger self each time. Now, that's what makes it easy for me to trust resurrection. That if I can do that on my final day of life, there's going to be a bigger self-emerging. I now can believe that experientially.

Brie Stoner: In closing, just read—

Richard Rohr: Oh, the end of the book, huh? Well, sort of the end of the book.

Brie Stoner: Sort of. You have a couple of great endings in there.

Richard Rohr: [QUOTE NOT VERIFIED] Yes, I am saying that the way things work and Christ are one and the same thing. This is not a religion to be either fervently joined or angrily rejected. It's a train ride already in motion. The tracks are visible everywhere.

Well, thank you for letting me write that God. I mean, I agree with it even more as I read it.

You can be a willing and happy traveler, or not. It's just a choice.

Yeah. Well, thank you for opening to that.

Brie Stoner: Thank you, Richard. Now as we close, the final question I wanted to ask is, "Where have you seen Christ in the way things work this week?"

Richard Rohr: This week where have I seen Christ in the way things work? Hmm. The first things that come to mind are stupid. [laughter] Umm, what? You know, about two years ago, I began to accept that doctors were apparently going to be a regular part of my life. I used to just hate my yearly physical, "Oh, God, I have to do my yearly physical again." Now it's every other week another doctor. Once I can accept the luxury that I even have to go to a doctor that how many people in Asia, and Africa, and Latin America have all the diseases I have but don't have a doctor, now I don't fight going to the doctor, or resent it, even resist it.

Now, what I'm trying to describe is an inner experience of death and resurrection. What I once resented has now become okay. It's the way things work. "This is the way your life has unfolded. Now almost every other week you have to go to a doctor for something." And I'm getting to know them personally, and they're getting to know me and, the nurses, and it's all becoming sort of personal, another community, that's really rather sweet. In fact, the one I went two days ago to the dermatologist to take these spots off my head, the nurse who's leading me in, she says, "We just love your voicemail." I said, "How do you know who I am?" She says, "Well, we all joke about your voice mail." I mean, I guess I say something

real happy, “This is Richard Rohr.” I don’t know. She says, “No one else sounds as happy in their voicemail.” [laughter] It’s just neat to see how you can create community wherever you go if you move beyond this formality to those little personal things, you know, so doctors in the world of hospitals and doctors’ offices, are a new resurrection in my life. So, who am I to complain? It’s just luxury upon luxury, gift upon gift, a grace upon grace, even all my health problems.

[music playing]

So, did that respond to your question?

Brie Stoner: It did.

Richard Rohr: Okay. All right.

Brie Stoner: Thank you, Richard.

Paul Swanson: Thanks, Richard.

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