

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 1, Episode 3

From the Beginning

Paul Swanson: Welcome to season one of Another Name for Everything, with Richard Rohr, exploring the core themes of his new book, The Universal Christ.

Brie Stoner: 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.

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Brie Stoner: And I'm Brie Stoner. 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 flat tires, email overload, and the shifting state of our world.

Paul Swanson: This is the third of twelve weekly episodes. Today, we'll be discussing the fourth chapter, "Original Goodness." This conversation takes us into the diverse perspectives of how Christians have viewed humanity, the good, the bad, and the depraved. Thankfully, Richard draws from his Franciscan lineage to offer a healthy anthropology to pair with a good theology.

A quick note, Richard casually mentions the Enneagram in our conversation. For those new to the Enneagram, it is a tool of many functions: spiritual, personality, and psyche. When Richard refers to Brie as a "four," and me as a "nine," it is in reference to the Enneagram typology.

Richard, you begin one of the chapters with a beautiful description of the cottonwood tree in the backyard of the CAC. I wonder if you could share the significance and some of the symbolism that you see with that tree watching over us on a daily basis?

Richard Rohr: Over the years, I bet I've described that tree to dozens and dozens of visitors. I must be honest and say that it still fascinates me. It's pure beauty. It's a 100- to 150-year-old Rio Grande Cottonwood that grows in the backyard of our center. I always say it's our supreme work of art. We have some nice art that's been given to me over the years hanging on the walls of the inside, but this is our natural cathedral. One arborist that we had to come and work on it almost ten years ago to make it live as long as it could, he said, "I've worked on Rio Grande Cottonwoods all my life, but I'd give this the Miss America prize." He said, "It's just as beautiful as it gets."

One of the reasons for that is, he suggested, it might have had a mutation. So all the branches take these illogical, circuitous turns in strange directions. The total effect, if that is a mutation, is absolute beauty. It's just almost from any angle. Visitor after visitor, just yesterday, again, say, "Wow. Can I take a picture of it or can I draw it?" So, I try to teach the spirituality of imperfection, that asymmetry, and you fours understand this, is more beautiful than symmetry, when it's sort of offset, when it's supposedly a mistake, and it ends up making it beautiful.

I say the best example of our spirituality of imperfection is right in our yard. Nature is entirely imperfect. If you looked at any flower or tree long enough, there's always an imperfection. It's amazing that in our man-made, and here I can probably use the word "man" for the most part, the perfection that we create, I think of French Provincial

architecture or design, it's just, forgive me, so ugly. It's just all this gilded furniture and symmetry, symmetry, symmetry everywhere, overstatement everywhere.

I was just in Europe teaching in Catholic Baroque churches. That was our attempt to win back you Protestants after you left us.

Brie Stoner: Thank you for that.

Richard Rohr: So, we said, "We'll make our churches so beautiful—

Brie Stoner: They won't resist.

Richard Rohr: --the Protestants will come back." Well, it ended up being, in my opinion, so ugly. Like as a Franciscan, I saw several golden Baroque statues of Saint Francis. That someone wouldn't say, "This misses the message, entirely misses the message to make Francis golden," or any saint, for that matter.

So, we've been raised and, you know, art ends up again and again being the best teacher of what an era really believes. We've been raised on a spirituality of artificial, man-made perfection. Divine perfection is always imperfection, always asymmetry, always off center. It's the exception that proves the rule in terms of a tree growing out of one little crack in a rock. That isn't the norm, and that's what makes it beautiful.

Why can't we learn that? Well, once we separated the soul and soul making from nature, I'm going to go so far as to say, it was all downhill, that we fell in love with words, ideas, perfect symmetry, and called that perfection.

Brie Stoner: I don't think I've ever made that connection before. You know what I mean?

Richard Rohr: Oh, and you as a four.

Brie Stoner: I know. I'm shocked.

Richard Rohr: Really, I'm so impressed.

Brie Stoner: I am here to shock you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, yeah.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. I think of course I understand that in art, and of course I understand that in nature, and yet it's so difficult for me to accept my own imperfection.

Richard Rohr: Yes, that's what it comes down to.

Brie Stoner: But I really love how you have said before that you pray for one humiliation a day.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, I do. I need it.

Brie Stoner: And you need that.

Richard Rohr: I need one humiliation a day.

Brie Stoner: Yeah, that you make that part of your practice.

Richard Rohr: It's true.

Brie Stoner: I wonder if you have any outstanding humiliation stories that come to mind of thinking that you really were doing something perfectly and you really were not.

Richard Rohr: Well, I've told it a number of times over the years, but actually I don't tell it a lot because it's so humiliating. When I was fourteen, my first year in the minor seminary, I had come from Kansas to Cincinnati, and the first Saturday, Father Warren takes—he's a jock if there ever was one—he took us all out to play baseball, assuming we all played baseball and knew baseball. I was so frightened, because I was never into competitive sports. I'd watched baseball enough that I can fake this, and I faked it enough, believe it or not, my first time at bat to get to first base. I was so proud of myself. Here I am on first base, not actually understanding the game or what's going on.

Well, this was quickly revealed by the guy who follows me at bat, makes a hit. I am running from first to second base. I knew that much. I see the ball coming toward me, and I thought, "Oh, I can be a hero. I can catch the ball." Oh, God. I stopped and even caught it. There was just a stunned silence in the whole field—

Brie Stoner: Oh, my gosh.

Richard Rohr: Father Warren, the jock priest, and all of my classmates, just, "Did that really just happen? He doesn't know that he's not supposed to catch the ball."

Brie Stoner: Oh, my gosh. That's awful.

Richard Rohr: Oh, it was horrible. Even Father Warren just walks humbly toward me with his head down, wondering what he's going to say to me, Richard. I don't know what they did. I was so in shock, but I knew I'd failed the test.

Brie Stoner: Oh, no.

Richard Rohr: I don't remember the rest of the morning.

Brie Stoner: You've blocked it probably.

Richard Rohr: I've blocked it out, yeah. But you know, at fourteen you're so insecure already, and here I am at this new place where I want to win the admiration of my peers, and I utterly failed to do it. From then on, they knew I knew nothing about sports, competitive sports. I still know nothing about it. It's boring to me, because it's all based on this whole thing of win-lose.

Then I was corrected. That's right. I can go forward with the story. In my novitiate four years later, we're out playing baseball again. Now, then I'd at least learned how to play. Now, we played in our brown robes.

Brie Stoner: Oh, you're kidding.

Paul Swanson: No way.

Richard Rohr: We never took them off that year. You had to live in it. People would come and take picture of us. It was so lovely, these monks as they thought, really friars, running in their brown robes. Father Beno, my novice master, after the first game, I think this is the only time I was directly corrected the whole year. He says, "Alexander." That was my name as a Franciscan for six years. He said, "It doesn't appear that you're really into the game." I said, "No, I guess I'm not that much, Father." He says, "I want to see a little hustle out of you. You should cheer." "Oh, okay." But he corrected me, not harshly, he was too kind a man, but, "You've got to get in to wanting to win." I said, "Well, I'll try," but I really just didn't care.

That had lasted at least five years, the non-caring about winning or losing in competitive sports. Now I can look back at it sixty years later and see that God—forgive me, I see everything theologically—God was preparing me to understand the gospel, that I'm convinced is win-win. God gave me a non-delight in winning and a non-fear of losing. Now, I still hated to lose morally, or perceptually, and people wanting me, but my ego was still intact, believe me. But theoretically, I've always been uninterested in anything framed in terms of winners and losers.

That had to be a gift from God, because I realize most of my peers who accepted the norm then interpreted the whole gospel that way. We call it a zero-sum view of reality, that there have to be losers for me to be a winner. There have to be. So, you set out to create losers. I'm convinced we read the gospel that way, which for me is a non-reading of the gospel. It's not good news anymore. The gospel for me, if it's going to be good news, it's got to be win-win. So, God was preparing me by my early mistakes.

Brie Stoner: That's an interesting connection though between experiences of humiliation and our cultural conditioning to always want to win and equating winning with a certain perception of perfection.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes.

Brie Stoner: That makes a lot of sense that both of those were—

Richard Rohr: They claim, and you'll have to tell me as a mother if this is true, that the woman, once she's had children, inherently has to let go of win-lose, because she wants to love all of her children equally. She certainly, if one is a little weak, or less smart, or less good looking, or less athletic, boy, she's the last one in the world who wants to think that way, "My little Johnny is just as good as Larry, and I'm going to communicate that to him," so she chooses a win-win worldview much earlier than the male does, if the male does it at all.

I hate to make such a generalization in regard to gender, because I know it isn't always true, but when you see the almost ecstatic excitement men get at athletic contests, you know you're dealing with something that's irrational. Can I use that word? Does it really matter whether this team wins over that team? They've been so trained to divide

reality and to put themselves in that game of being a winner. From my side, after years of men's work, they really don't realize what a price they paid for it in terms of their own soul. Because once you frame reality win-lose, most people are losers. To win by our is only one team, or one person, or one talent on "America's Got Talent," and everybody else so-called loses or is a loser.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: I feel like this would be an excellent moment to get an official Richard Rohr endorsement for all men to give up fantasy sports. I feel like we should just get this recorded so that I can lord it over certain people, hypothetically.

Paul Swanson: It reminds me that Jerry Seinfeld I think is the one who has the joke about how we don't actually cheer for teams. We're cheering for uniforms, because players get traded all the time, but you continue to cheer for that same team.

Richard Rohr: God, that's good. I never heard that.

Paul Swanson: It's so funny, because it takes a step back, right?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: The hilarity of cheering for someone in a uniform versus the people who actually make up the team.

Richard Rohr: Wow. Let me give you my more gracious interpretation of this. This is probably going on longer than you want, but I think building on that, the male has such a need of community, brotherhood, camaraderie, and the quickest way to artificially but, really, create it is to create a team that I can cheer for with other brothers that are at my side. So, it gives you a pseudo sense of communitas, brotherhood without really suffering or sacrificing anything. "Boy, these are my brothers. We're all for the Yankees." We want communitas.

Victor Turner coined that phrase, and he said that's what's happening at a lot of religious services. If we all raise our hands together, if you're Catholic, you all make the sign of the cross together, "Okay, I'm safe. The person at my right and left also made the sign of the cross. I'm in my community." It works, and I don't want to put that down. That's how we all start.

But your example of a uniform, that's good. Yeah. Like my Franciscan robes, we wore them the whole year of our novitiate, even slept in them. We had a pajama habit.

Brie Stoner: That sounds really comfortable.

Richard Rohr: It was horrible.

Brie Stoner: Oh, my gosh.

Richard Rohr: Especially in the summer. Oh, my God.

Brie Stoner: Jeez.

Paul Swanson: Wow. Yeah, I'm thinking, furthering these, even the way you start off with the cottonwood tree and stories of imperfection, about the language we use. How do you see that we've limited the image of God by using terms such as infallible and inerrant?

Richard Rohr: Yes, or Almighty. See, that was such a problem for God, if I can dare to interpret the mind of God, that He had to present—He, I'm still going to use—had to present himself as vulnerable in the most dramatic way possible to undo that worldview. What else do you call the crucifixion, the rejected Jesus, except a vulnerable name for God, a vulnerable image of God? Because God seemed to know they're trapped inside of this Almighty God world, and I'm going to show them that, in fact, I'm revealed through weakness. Paul gets that, "When I'm weak, I'm strong. I'm going to reveal myself through identifying with the Israelites who were the enslaved people instead of the Egyptians." I mean that is the consistent subtext of the whole Bible, and we still missed it, because we still admire almighty-ness more than vulnerability. We still admire winners more than losers.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: I actually was just, because I'm writing something, was reading Exodus 14 this morning. I wanted to make sure it really did say that. God took the side of the Israelites against the Egyptians, Exodus 14:25. I always thought, what does a poor Egyptian think? I have several Egyptian friends. God took the side of the Israelites against the Egyptians.

Well, that's the narrative, to get us to change our narrative, but it had little effect, even among, I'm sorry to say, the Israelites. Although, in general, if you check out the politics of Jewish people, not in Israel but in much of the rest of the world today, they tend to be on the side of what we would call the more progressive, liberal politics that takes the side of the underdog. That's pretty true, not in Israel itself. Once you're under duress and fear of persecution, you go right back to taking the side of the Egyptians, the Pharaoh.

Brie Stoner: Unless, of course, and I think this is what is being modeled for us, that there can be an act of courageous vulnerability begets vulnerability and kind of shifts the power—

Richard Rohr: Go ahead. Yes.

Brie Stoner: --dynamic. That seems to be the God example or the God narrative of radical vulnerability in the face of this binary of power. But it requires community.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: We need each other for that, because we can't do it alone. Like, I think about even what's happening in politics, and Me Too, the Me Too movement. It's like there's this radical, collective vulnerability that then begets something beyond power structures.

Richard Rohr: That's well stated. I agree with that.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: It's almost impossible to do it alone. We were aware of that in the first centuries of Christianity in this whole idealization of the martyr. You actually had to have the martyr's

bones underneath the altar to be an official Christian altar. That's how much the heroic vulnerability was idealized. The first saints were all martyrs. But, you're still making a good point. That was idealized by a small group of people. Could they have walked out into the Colosseum like Perpetua and Felicity, the first women martyrs, unless there was a whole team cheering them on, quietly, from the sidelines?

Brie Stoner: Or even just having each other.

Richard Rohr: Having each other, yes. Yes.

Brie Stoner: Like the camaraderie of each other's example and story, and courage. But it's hard. I mean, I want to name that, the reality of making courageous steps of vulnerability, that's not easy.

Richard Rohr: No, no.

Brie Stoner: Especially in our time right now.

Richard Rohr: No, it isn't. No, it isn't. Where power and success are so utterly idealized. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It leads me to think, too, just within my own small context in life of you talk about Christ as a mirror and how mirroring happens in my marriage with my wife. Particularly that I'm noticing right now is with my three-year-old daughter where I see things in her that raise things in me, but she's just mirroring back to what I've shown her.

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Paul Swanson: How does this relational mirroring relate to the mind of Christ that you speak of as a mirror?

Richard Rohr: I more and more believe that holiness, virtue in general, is passed on, not as much by the teacher method—I'm not saying the didactic style doesn't communicate—but much more by resonance, by seeing it, by having it mirrored and admired in me, "You did a good thing, Billy, that you cared about that little girl." We need good behavior mirrored for us. I think that's what good parents do.

It's only been Winnicott and other psychologists of the last fifty years who've unpackaged this whole thing of mirroring, how much of the self is created by seeing itself admired or rejected in other people's eyes, that the way we look at one another matters. I think parents learn that the best, because you become aware, I guess by the second year, "My God, he learned that from me. She learned that from me. That's the way I react. Look, she's already picked it up."

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Of course, the way I understand God, because that's the way I've experienced God, but I read it then in the mystics and the saints, is God seems to be the perfect, ultimate mirror. What I mean by a mirror is that which receives everything just as it is without distortion, without correction, without adjustment. That's what we're all waiting for, isn't it? Someone who can know everything about me and still receive me. A mirror receives. It doesn't distort, or it's not a mirror.

That's why I use the metaphor of the mirror so much in my book. At one point, I was even

wanting it to be in the title, but the publishers said, “This takes a certain degree of reflection and self-knowledge, so the ordinary man or woman on the street doesn’t get your whole mirror theology until they’ve reflected on it a while.” That’s probably true. So, it isn’t in the title, but it’s in the book.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I find it to be such a helpful metaphor.

Richard Rohr: Oh, I do, too. Oh, I do, too. You’ve heard that expression from the Buddhists, “the mirror mind,” that when our mind can just receive reality without analysis, embroidering, adjustment, judgment, that would be the mind of Christ. I think they’re right. Well, maybe they’d say the mind of Buddha.

Brie Stoner: What would be the relationship between accepting that reality with that kind of non-judgmental openness and yet still recognizing that there’s something that we’re all working toward to reveal more of that Christ-likeness? You know what I mean?

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes.

Brie Stoner: There’s a tension there. Because in a way, one could take that as an excuse to—

Richard Rohr: Yep, yep, yep. You’re right.

Brie Stoner: “I’m just going to receive all reality.”

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: So, how does the mind of Christ also encourage our action?

Richard Rohr: Let me try this, and I hope it’s helpful. The only people who have the courage and the insight to work for change in a loving way are people who have experienced unconditional love themselves, unconditional acceptance. Now, you can go into correcting, and punishment, and threat rather easily, but I’m not talking about that. You don’t know how to receive things as they are without judgment until you have once, probably more than once, been received that way. Then you sort of learn how to do it. “Oh, it is possible to challenge things in a non-accusatory, non-dismissive way, because now I know what that feels like.” Most of us didn’t get that from parents, because they’re so preoccupied with raising us perfectly.

Brie Stoner: Right.

Richard Rohr: But it’s why, I’ve seen it in the men’s work, why so many people, and I don’t want to make an absolute from this, but received it from grandparents and friends. Then when they get older, they say, “Well, mom sort of did, and dad sort of did,” but let’s let mom and dad off the hook. They’re good enough mothers, good enough fathers, normally, but you can understand this as young people. You are just so preoccupied with raising the perfect kid, with correcting their mistakes, that you end up making a lot of mistakes.

Usually by your forties, you start putting your mom and dad on a pedestal. “God, she was patient with me.” But in your teens and your twenties, you can’t see that yet. I want to say

that, because people waste a good twenty years hating their parents, and they're not yet trained as mirrors normally. They can't mirror you perfectly. They're too eager to protect you. They're too eager to raise up a type—no, type A personality wouldn't work—a wonderful personality.

Brie Stoner: But they have their own stuff. I mean, yeah, like that makes perfect sense.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. They still have their own stuff. It's amazing to me how far your generation has gone, those of you in your thirties now, to know all that, to want to do it perfectly, and yet even you will make mistakes.

Brie Stoner: Oh, I already have that figured out. I've already screwed my kids up, Richard.

Richard Rohr: I doubt that you've screwed them up.

Brie Stoner: Oh, well, I don't know.

Richard Rohr: But yeah, they will come back to you when they're in their thirties, "Mom, why were you that way?" or, "Daddy, why?" So, if you could accept that, they will accept your own imperfection. That's what psychologically we meant by original sin. With the best of intentions, parents will make mistakes and pass on the wounded human situation to their children. You cannot not not, because you are imperfect, too.

Paul Swanson: This is a great time I think to talk about original sin, and Brie, I know that you have a question.

Brie Stoner: Well, I was looking at you, because any time we talk about original sin, I get a little fussy about Augustine and what he handed us, which feels like, I mean, poor guy.

Richard Rohr: I know. I know.

Brie Stoner: I mean really. He had a really hard time accepting himself and all of himself.

Richard Rohr: Yes. That's what it came down to, yeah.

Brie Stoner: We have a lot of baggage around this notion of original sin, but what's your take on it? Because I know you have a different perspective, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Which I think is Biblical by the way. [laughter]

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Can I ask now, you were both raised in different Protestant churches, you had the phrase "original sin"?

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Did you?

Brie Stoner: Oh, yeah.

Richard Rohr: That's another example of how you thought you reformed Catholicism, and you repeated the same thing all over again.

Brie Stoner: I mean I think we even made it worse, because it wasn't just original sin, but it was particularly, I mean, Eve really screwed things up; really.

Richard Rohr: Okay. I think we've got to begin the way the Bible begins with original blessing, original innocence, original goodness. I use those three phrases almost interchangeably, and some prefer one or the other. You've heard me say it in other contexts, you can't start with the problem. You can't start with negativity. You can't start with "no," or for some terrible reason, it's hard to get beyond the negative, beyond the forever solving of the negative problem like Christianity became in the eyes of many clergy, and they accepted this role, what I call sin management. It was all managing the problem, managing the problem, and making God's only vocation and role, or Jesus' only vocation, the managing of this problem of sin. Do you realize how that's sort of a negative foundation?

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Sin management, and we priests made our role into the forgiving of sin, said we were the only ones who could do it. It all just came from taking ourselves too seriously, or taking the gospel as a job of sin management. That's what happens when you begin with original sin.

Richard Rohr: Now, you obviously already know that phrase is not in the Bible. It was created four centuries later by a wonderful man, and I mean that, Augustine.

Brie Stoner: I'll take your word for it.

Paul Swanson: Brie's still working on that.

Richard Rohr: We're still working on that. Most people are. It's like Paul. Paul and Augustine are the two superheroes, if you'll allow me to say that, and the greater light you have, the greater shadow you cast. That is supremely true of both Paul and Augustine. They're just monumental Christian figures who carried a monumental shadow in the way they expressed their experience of truth.

So, Augustine thinks he's doing us a favor by trying to explain what we all eventually discover in ourselves, "You know, I'm sort of small sometimes. I'm sort of nasty sometimes. I'm picky. I'm negative. I'm all the things we hate." He thought he would relieve us from this by attributing this fault to Adam and Eve. They didn't have our knowledge of history that we have now. They really thought Adam and Eve existed 6,000 years ago—well, 8,000 now, I guess—and this was passed on from parent to child, parent to child. It was genetically inherited.

Can you see how this was meant to be compassionate? Don't beat up on yourself so much, but it laid the foundation for my mother made me do it, or hating your mother and hating your father, which most of my generation got into, that, "Okay, it wasn't my fault. It's my family's fault." They were half right, that sin is a corporate phenomenon. You've heard me say, if I get time, I want to write one more book to show that I'm convinced this was Paul's idea, too. Augustine got it from Paul, that sin is a collective notion, the unsolvable human

situation, the unsolvable imperfection of reality.

We're really programmed to read reality this way right now. Frankly, let's make it immediate, with the present president and leadership we have in Washington DC, how can reality be this absurd? How can you have this many educated people, and we still elected a president of this quality, or lack of quality? Then on the church side, how can these priests, and bishops, and cardinals who we thought in the Catholic world were our best and our brightest show themselves to be this horrible? The pedophilia crisis. I think we're really ready for this message—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --that there's an inherent absurdity, there's an inherent brokenness to reality. That's what the doctrine of original sin was trying to say. But unfortunately, we attributed this corporate notion to the individual person and made you nasty, and "totally depraved," Calvin says.

Brie Stoner: A worm.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: A pile of manure.

Richard Rohr: A pile of manure, and God bless Luther. They had a horrible anthropology, a horrible image of the human person, which they've just inherited from a lot of fire and brimstone preaching, which should have been aimed at the collective. But we didn't even have the words in the Catholic world till two popes ago when Pope John Paul II introduced to Catholic moral theology, as definitive, the notions of "institutional sin" and "collective evil." We didn't have the words, because sin was entirely localized in you and you. You were bad. You were nasty.

Can you see a good intention, but without some—here's where good theology's important. It is really, or good thinking is important—good Jesuit discernment to help us make just sometimes one clarifying distinction.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Okay. He was half right, but interpreted and aimed at the individual, it ended up being horribly wrong. Isn't that sad and fascinating? You know, that's been much of the work of my life, trying to help people make those distinctions, and why I end up always saying, probably too many times, "Well, he was half right, but he was half wrong."

Brie Stoner: That's so helpful, because it's—

Richard Rohr: It is.

Brie Stoner: It's human.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: I mean it humanizes these giants.

Richard Rohr: Because I'm going to end up being half right and half wrong, too. Probably much more than half, yeah.

Brie Stoner: Probably just half wrong about fours.

Richard Rohr: About fours. I just don't appreciate fours and nines enough. That's right.

Brie Stoner: That's what you were wrong about.

Paul Swanson: This brings up for me, as you know, my wife Laura and I are about to have our second child. We're going to enter that liminal space of new life and original innocence.

Richard Rohr: Any day now.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it could be any day. I've got to keep checking my phone, make sure she's not in labor. I can never imagine saying to my new son like, "You are fallen."

Richard Rohr: I know.

Paul Swanson: I think, how do we protect that original innocence while also acknowledging, too, that there are systems of oppression and suffering that are alive in this world and making their impact as well?

Richard Rohr: I'm probably just building on what I just tried to say, but I think the key is to unpack more the notions of collective evil, the world and really the devil, although we made the devil an individual too. But you know how I talk about the world, the flesh, and the devil being the three sources of evil. We emphasized almost entirely the flesh, the middle level of individual, moral imperfection, which took our people's eyes off of level one and level three.

It seems to me that is what really traps people, that the whole collective, everybody on this street believes in success and competition. Everybody who's here in the pews in the church this Sunday has agreed to this collective lie of capitalism being the best framing of reality. When the whole group has agreed to the delusion, it's almost impossible to convict the individual of his or her mistake. All you end up doing is giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon about their individual evil.

Let's take the very issue of greed or gluttony. Let's be honest and admit those are collectively admired. You're good if you're a consumer. You're building up the American economy. You're a successful person if you have a huge, overstated house. How are you supposed to enter that world and tell the person, "But, in fact, greed and gluttony are capital sins"? You can't preach at that level at all, so you end up saying, "Well, I guess it isn't true."

We've almost made ourselves incapable of preaching the gospel, because we so situated it at the individual level, admired it at the corporate level. The same with pride. The same with lust, really. That's why we're in this sexual crisis we're in right now. We're a lust-soaked culture, and then you're supposed to tell the individual seventeen-year-old boy filled with hormones not to think about it, not to do it. It just isn't going to work.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: It isn't going to work. I'm merely touching the surface of this problem, but until we start addressing corporate sin, collective illusion, but if you do it from the pulpit, people, "Well, Father, you're getting a little political there." Watch it. Don't critique the system. Just keep critiquing individuals. We ended up unable to really critique individuals, because we had already affirmed it. I'm just saying the same thing over and over.

I'm still struggling with how to do this myself, but I'm convinced the Bible is presenting a corporate notion of salvation and a corporate notion of sin. I hope this book on The Universal Christ is a movement in that direction to understand salvation as a corporate notion.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: You heard me say, was that yesterday, where I said "Conversion is when we move from 'I' to 'we,' where you start reading things in the collective." This is just a huge weight off our back of needing to feel nasty about ourselves all the time. No, we are sinful. Yes, I've said yes to it, too. I'm enjoying the fruits of it, too. But you've heard me say in my earlier writings the individual is not prepared to use two of Paul's wonderful phrases. The individual is not prepared to carry either the weight of glory or the burden of sin, either one; the collective, yes. We are Christ. We are flawed. That's what was good about the original notion of original sin, but what we in the western church didn't have very much was a corporate notion of salvation.

Most will still fight me on it, and all I do is I want you to go back and I want you to study the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Noah, and the covenant with David. Just start with those three. Read the whole text and come back and tell me that Yahweh is talking about the individual Abraham, the individual Noah, or the individual David. It is with the House of David, with the people Israel. The notion of salvation from the beginning is collective.

This is why I do love scripture, because this a way I can finally give a definitive notion to people who think they're scriptural. The people who most think they're scriptural have again and again missed the central points, like the identification with the outsider, like the collective notion of sin and salvation.

Brie Stoner: It requires a different mind, doesn't it?

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: To be able to even see the waters that we're swimming in when you're talking about the corporate evil.

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's right.

Brie Stoner: Because we're in it.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: And then, also, to be able to hold the paradox of us being Christ and also us being

imperfect. If I can, I'd love to segue a little bit—

Richard Rohr: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Brie Stoner: --and ask what the role of contemplation is in that?

Richard Rohr: That's a good segue. See, the contemplative way of seeing is precisely seeing things in their wholeness. I've been playing on the word pornography lately. What makes something pornographic is to take a part and pretend that's the whole, and to idolize the part instead of the whole. The dualistic mind allows you to do that; in fact, it prefers to do that. It likes to divide and conquer, separate things, dissect things.

In fact, that's almost what it means to have a college education, even if I dare say a Jesuit college education, is to learn how to make good distinctions. Because my distinctions are good, they're valid. Well, there's a place for that, and I admit that. That creates science. That creates engineering. That creates mechanics. That creates a certain kind of Greek logic that is very helpful, so not to speak against it. I don't want to speak against it.

But the trouble is you become so expert at that after four years at the university, being the smartest girl in class, or the smartest boy in class, by making distinctions, that you think that's what it means to be smart. Now, I'm convicting the church when I say that, because we stopped giving our unique, and privileged, and much broader access point where you know things by participation, where you know things not by observation, not by speculation, not by analysis, but frankly by communion. Stay with me. You can't get this quickly.

You know it, as the Franciscan tradition said, "Love must precede knowledge." You only know things that you first of all surrender to. You meet them not with a critical eye, not with the subject/object way of knowing, objectifying it, but subject to subject, where I know it by admiring it, where I know it by recognizing, if I dare say, the 10 percent that is good, and right, and beautiful before I concentrate on the 90 percent that I disagree with.

You could almost always do that if you're humble. If you're not humble, I don't think you can be a contemplative, because you want to say the smart thing that got you an "A" at college, that made the professor admire you. I admit, it works there. It works in science class. We need it in science class.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: But that's what we call dualistic thinking. You get so trained in dualistic thinking and you get "As" for being a good dualistic thinker, so by the time you've graduated, why would you want to change? Unless you've, and I'll just say it this way, unless you've learned how to pray. "What? What's he talking about?" I'm not talking about saying prayers. I'm talking about existing in a state of communion, but we weren't taught to think of prayer as that. That's what we call contemplation.

I'm convinced that's why the Desert Fathers and Mothers already in the 3rd and 4th centuries started changing the word "prayer" to the word "contemplation." You say, "Where did this word come from?" Because it isn't in the New Testament to my knowledge. This is my judgment, I can't prove I'm right, but they had already seen that the word "prayer" had

been cheapened, had been trivialized, had been made into something functional, problem-solving.

Brie Stoner: Transactional.

Richard Rohr: Transactional, yeah. And so, they wanted to create a new word that showed I'm not talking about transactional praying, making announcements to God and telling God what you need, which by the way, Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount not to do. All the keywords about prayer are in the Sermon on the Mount. "Go into your inner room, shut the door, and pray to your Father in secret." That's not social prayer. That's not liturgy as we Catholics called it, or even chanting psalms together. This is an inner descending into the soul. All the keywords are given in the Sermon on the Mount. There are about three or four paragraphs on prayer. He's describing what we are now trying to describe as contemplation.

So, don't be frightened by the word. We had to use a new word to liberate the notion of communion from transactional saying of prayers, which became reciting prayers, reading prayers, chanting prayers, all of which there's a place for, but when it overrides the inner room, it's not doing us any favor anymore.

Brie Stoner: I find that so helpful to think about contemplation as that deep dive of the soul that allows you to embrace the whole and things as a whole.

Richard Rohr: The whole. The whole. That's right.

Brie Stoner: I was thinking about Parker Palmer just now, too, and his definition of contemplation—

Richard Rohr: That's very good.

Brie Stoner: --where he talks about contemplation is what helps us cut through the illusions that keep us separated from the real. This term is changing so much. Like we're on this—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: We're on this journey in evolution where not just our faith tradition is changing, but even how we think about contemplation is changing.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: I wondered if you could share what is changing about contemplation right now or how we think about contemplation.

Richard Rohr: You know, we at the CAC are finding ourselves in a unique position to recognize this, because our first thirty years, we, in great part, tried to teach contemplation to our interns, to our students with some degree of success, but a lot of degree of not full buy-in. Even the students and interns hesitated to admit that, because they felt, "Oh, that means I'm not a good student."

I think, and this is just my way of saying of it, one reason a lot of people didn't totally buy-in—they usually bought in, in part, it was very compelling—was because the manner that we taught them was more what I'm going to call monastic, Buddhist, nothing against

Buddhism, really a pattern or a practice that would be more accessible to celibates who don't have children and family. I don't have a wife and children interfering. When I go home, I can easily shut the door. I'm not saying I do it as much as I should, but I have the complete opportunity to do my quiet sit several times a day.

Well, we saw a lot of people who even did do this, and it didn't change their consciousness. We found out they were still racists. They were still sexist. They still hated gay people. Well, I thought this was supposed to change consciousness. All it was was the new technique.

The ego is going to use anything it can. It did it with the Charismatic movement that I was involved with in the '70s. Speaking in tongues, and being ecstatic, and raising your hands like you Evangelicals do, that was the technique. Then we discovered a lot of these people had horrible politics, redneck worldviews, if I can call it that, but, boy, they knew how to praise Jesus. In more and more cases, it just didn't compute that here we were teaching this more, what we thought was a mature form of prayer.

I realized at one point, you know, God gave me the entrée into this already in the book *The Naked Now*, over ten years old now. I remember saying there, "The real universal paths of transformation are great love and great suffering." The practice of meditation, contemplation, the prayer of quiet, is simply to maintain and preserve what you momentarily learned or experienced in moments of great love and moments of great suffering.

Here we are ten years later finding an expanded way to say that, and who's teaching us that is people who've suffered. We're really recognizing that it is time to expand the notion of contemplation, not just special practices, which have the temptation of making you think you're special, and elite, or enlightened, and look at function. What functions in your life to penetrate your illusions—and I'm backing up Parker Palmer here who said it very well—what penetrates your illusions and knocks [knocking sounds] on the hard bottom of reality? What has, as Brian McLaren said at our recent conference, "the sound of the genuine?"

Brie Stoner: Oh, that Howard Thurman quote.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Oh, I love that.

Richard Rohr: We all know how to recognize in a moment genuine people—

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: --genuine poetry, genuine words, that has the knock of the real. I'm afraid even a lot of contemplative teaching, as much as I've tried to pass it on, still didn't have the sound of the genuine, still didn't have it in the personification. A lot of times it didn't feel like, I'm going to say it, real people. We saw that lack of reality by their lack of love for helpless people, homeless people, other people than their group.

That seeing became so overwhelming in the last five years by the politics of American Christians, even American contemplative Christians, that it became undeniable. We have to

broaden our understanding of contemplation and look at function, not just practice. Now we'd say, maybe working at a homeless shelter once a week would function as something that penetrates your illusions and knocks on the hard bottom of reality better than sitting in good Buddhist style twice a day on a mat.

We're not throwing out—hear this in a non-dual way—I still need my silent sit, but I have to complement it with, what we call in the CAC, action, behavior, participation with otherness. We're calling the otherness “great love and great suffering.” The great love and great suffering are not the way you and I naturally live each day. We live on the surface of the day avoiding great love, on the surface of the day avoiding great suffering.

I admit that both of those, we're going to get back to what I said before, are experienced by slipping into the collective. “Okay, I'm not suffering right now, I admit on this day, but look at that homeless man. He sure is. Can I look at life through his pair of eyes?” There's the movement. And I think that movement, penetrating your illusions about you being better than him, is a radical contemplation. We've got to start saying that.

But it was Barbara Holmes' book that solidified that for many of our students and many on our staff, yourselves included. That here we had a black woman theologian making a very convincing and compelling case for the black form of worship, the black spiritual, in fact, being contemplative, and you say, “Why didn't I see that before?”

Brie Stoner: Yeah, in the arts, too. I love how she brings the arts and the expressive quality of the arts as another form.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: Would you say then, Richard, that anything that helps us shift from that “me” to “we” is part of that function, from the “I” to the “we”?

Richard Rohr: Yeah. It almost always has to include that. I know you agree with me. That would even be the danger of the arts. If the arts keeps you in your little world—

Brie Stoner: Separate, right.

Richard Rohr: --of specialness, and “I know how to appreciate Van Gogh.”

Paul Swanson: Poor Paul can't.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. That could, and I know you know that, could have the same effect. But if Van Gogh in observing him leads you into universal compassion, universal sympathy, yes. Hallelujah.

Paul Swanson: How does nature and animals, how do they play a role in our own contemplative seeing?

Richard Rohr: Dare I try, yeah. It's funny. I was just looking out my kitchen window yesterday, and yesterday just became one request or project after another all day. I went home frazzled, and I was looking out my kitchen window, and I saw three doves, mourning doves, were on the electric wire outside my window. I just let them ground me, because I said, “They're not thinking my thoughts. I can't compare them to my way of life, and they appear to be

totally happy. They appear to be. I hope they are.” But I thought of those doves as no one could deny that they are real. I can see them. They’re taking up a space. They’re there. That is reality more than concepts are. It’s undeniable thing-ness.

I could just feel myself settling by enjoying their reality. I had to, first of all, honor their reality, allow their reality, “You exist right now, little doves. God knows you’re existing, and apparently God is quite pleased with your existence.” Now I’m allowing myself to be pleased.

Richard Rohr: As you probably know, I learned at least some of that from my dog that I had for fifteen years, Venus, who I’d so often be working on my computer or answering an irritable email and being irritated, and I’d just glance over at Venus on the floor, and she’d just be gazing up at me. She could hold my attention longer than I could hold hers. I always said she taught me how to be present more than the Baltimore Catechism taught me real presence. It didn’t know how to teach it. It just knew how to dictate it, as it were, as a belief.

Richard Rohr: I think nature has the power to do that, almost more than anything else. Anything that is natural and outside our world of concepts, man-made, human-made, once we made it, we’re too involved in the intricacies of its meaning. But a meaning that is just there of itself, if you’ll surrender to it and appreciate it, recognize its wholeness again, it almost always can liberate you from the moment of over-conceptualization, over-obsession that this is the real world. No, that’s the real world, those three doves sitting on the electric wire, or Venus sitting at my side.

I really miss her presence. She died a little over a year ago, because she taught me presence. I think we were meant to live with animals. I do. Because almost any animal can teach you that. Now, in lieu of animals, we’ll take children. [laughter] No.

Brie Stoner: I still call them animals.

Richard Rohr: No, because little children do the same thing, especially babies. They’re pure thing-ness. As cute as they are, they still poop and pee.

Brie Stoner: Oh, yeah.

Richard Rohr: There’s the imperfection right at the beginning, right at the beginning, and yet, you love them infinitely. What a lesson.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: It makes me think of, I know one of your favorite poets, Mary Oliver.

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah.

Brie Stoner: There is something about poetry that helps connect the dots. It’s like we’ve forgotten how to just be in our bodies and be in the world. I think that’s part of what I feel reflected back when I see my kids.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: There's this raw, unapologetic belonging.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Animals and nature bring that to me as well, that just kind of freedom to be.

Richard Rohr: It's so true. They can prove this. The advertising industry has discovered this. If they want to get your attention, have either a baby or a dog in the commercial. You just watch. There's not a commercial that doesn't have a baby or a dog, because we're all just eyes. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: I remember being at the supermarket with my mother, who loved babies. I think that's why we were so well loved. There would be a woman with a baby two aisles over, and she had to go and look at it.

Brie Stoner: Oh, yeah.

Richard Rohr: She had to.

Brie Stoner: Oh, my gosh, yeah.

Richard Rohr: She could not not look at a baby. Something magical was happening to her. It returned to, I guess, when we were little, or whatever.

Brie Stoner: I think in closing, if you could share with us what is one experience of mirroring that you have had, of Christ mirroring, that you have had today?

Richard Rohr: Today?

Brie Stoner: Or this week.

Richard Rohr: Okay. Where I was mirrored?

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Well, you two are doing it right now, looking at me so patiently and so kindly and accepting whatever I say as adequate. Do you think this doesn't affirm my selfhood? My goodness, these two young people are taking my infinite blabbering seriously, and they think it matters. No, that's no stretch. You're mirroring me very well. That makes me feel very safe and that maybe my message could help someone. And so, it gives me the desire to mirror the world the way you're mirroring me.

So, thank you. What a nice way to end. No one's ever put it that way. Thank you, but it's true. I'm not being nice.

Paul Swanson: We've got it on recorded tape, so it's got to be true.

Brie Stoner: You've done that mirroring for so many of us.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, thank you.

Brie Stoner: In our journeys of not knowing where we fit in the story and feeling outside of the faith that we were given, we need our elders to mirror back the okay-ness of the liminal spaces, and you've definitely done that.

Richard Rohr: You know, you need to not be mirrored for a while to know how wonderful it feels when someone receives you. That's true of every human being, yeah.

[music playing]

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