

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 1, Episode 5

Respect, Wonder &
Reverence

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: Paul Swanson.

Brie Stoner: And 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 getting groceries, forgotten passwords and the shifting state of our world.

Paul Swanson: This is the fifth of twelve weekly episodes. Today we'll be discussing the seventh chapter, "Going Somewhere Good," the eighth chapter, "Doing and Saying," and the ninth chapter, "Things at Their Depth." This episode explores a lot at the heart of *The Universal Christ*, such as being open to change, participating in changing the system around us, and experiencing the fullness of life at its depth.

Brie Stoner: As we're wanting to discuss some specific chapters this morning, you talk in your book in chapter seven about the nature of change, and it's so difficult for us to accept change, at least for me it is.

Richard Rohr: All of us.

Brie Stoner: Theoretically I'm all about it but then when it's actually happening, I'm dying. I hate it. So, I was curious to know what is the most difficult change that you've gone through or are currently experiencing right now?

Richard Rohr: I do think this whole what I'm going to call well-known-ness that I now either suffer or enjoy, I don't know which, has always surprised me and scared me. I can say honestly before God, I know I didn't plan this or seek this. I always say I'm not really ambitious. I'm righteous, which is worse, but I don't have to fight ambition too much. Maybe it's because I've always enjoyed a certain well-known-ness from the very first year so maybe I've learned to take it for granted.

So, it's still been a change that I've constantly feared. When I see my name on books and I see the way I'm introduced at conferences, I get the mail I get, all of it says, "Richard, what have you become?" Is there anything true about that? I fear being a phony. I fear being a hypocrite. I fear being self-promoting. That's been the hardest change, this moving into notoriety, if I can use that word.

I know there are a lot of people who love me, and this balances it, and I need it. There are a lot of people who hate me, too. And so, it means holding the projections, and I do use that word intentionally, the projections from both sides; the people who put me on a pedestal that I don't deserve, and the people who hate me and don't even know me, so it feels like I don't deserve that either. You know you've heard that phrase "It's lonely at the top." I'm not saying that to gain any sympathy. I have a wonderful life, but there is a loneliness in being thought you're a whole bunch of things and you know you're not. The split consciousness,

and I'm sure I jump back and forth. My ego inflates in enjoying all this fame and admiration and then in the quiet of my own little house, I say, "But, Richard, you know it's not true." Even when I was reading a little bit of the book this morning, and I'm not making this up. I'm not exaggerating it. I really said this several times, "Did I write that?"

Brie Stoner: That's pretty good.

Richard Rohr: "That was good. Where did that come from?"

Paul Swanson: Wow. That's wild. Literally this morning, my daughter was asking what the word famous means.

Richard Rohr: Really?

Paul Swanson: My wife said, "Well, you know Richard. He's famous in a lot of circles," and that didn't make sense, like, known by a lot of people. My mom's like-- My mom. My wife.

Richard Rohr: My wife.

Paul Swanson: My Freudian slip. She says, "A lot of kids know who Daniel Tiger is," and then she got what famous was because he's a cartoon character that kids knew.

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's a cartoon.

Paul Swanson: You didn't make her radar on the fame so she'll help keep you humble.

Richard Rohr: Daniel Tiger.

Brie Stoner: You got to beat Daniel Tiger, padre.

Richard Rohr: That's a cartoon figure. Oh, okay.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. It's interesting, though, because I do feel like this tendency that we have to project wisdom, or goodness, or eldership, or that person is holy.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes.

Brie Stoner: Not me. That person, they really, really know. That split, I think, also has to do with that split that you talk about so much between us and God, of—

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's perfect.

Brie Stoner: --putting it out there instead of being able to see it in our own messiness and complexity.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. You've probably heard me say I'm often bothered by Evangelical music, which just keeps saying over and over again how wonderful God is. Of course God is wonderful, but coming with that positive theology is again and again a negative anthropology. A negative image of the human person and so we project more and more greatness onto God and never let it reflect back to the dignity in which we have been created in that God's image. So, too much God praise when it's exaggerated and hyperbolic, even though God deserves all praise,

I'm not denying that but your very need to excessively do it is usually a loss of your own power. Yeah, just to confirm your point.

Paul Swanson: To continue with that thread of the split, you have this fabulous story about your professor talking about Plato and Jesus. I wonder if you could relay that to kind of set some of that groundwork?

Richard Rohr: There was a Franciscan. He was fairly young, had just come back from studying in Europe during the early '60s, the Vatican Council, so he got totally invested in the historical theology that I sort of present. I had him for four years as my liturgy professor and four years as my church history professor. So, we got to know how he thought. Larry Landini was his name, an Italian American, a very imaginative genius of sorts, very creative. So, he had dropped the line in various contexts in church history and in the liturgy class that much of the Church is platonic; and, of course, because we'd all studied philosophy, we knew what that meant. Platonic where there's a huge split between matter and spirit, between soul and body. The two never really came together in Plato's philosophy. That's why we speak of platonic idealism, the love of ideals rather than reality.

So, Plato was often spoken of critically because we were Franciscan incarnationalists. And so, he summed it up in the very last day of my deacon class in 1969. He'd always walk in with a pile of books, which he'd hardly ever quote from but I guess that's what professors do. He's holding this pile of books backing out the door, and he says, "Just remember, much of the Church has more to do with Plato than it does with Jesus," that he would make that his final definitive statement was just mind-blowing, because this man had a critical mind, and loved the Church, by the way. He loved liturgy and Catholicism, and so this wasn't a rebel. This was an orthodox loyalist, but he still saw that again and again the real theology of the Church was not incarnational. God was still out there to be placated, to be sacrificed to, to be pleased, and the gap that Jesus in Christ overcame was really not an active principle in most Catholics' lives. He was critical of Protestantism. He felt even more so with Protestants. We were bad enough, but he said, "They completely missed the point," forgive me.

Brie Stoner: Oh yeah. It's like it's not even a basic assumption in most of our Christian understanding. Ilia Delio says that. She's like, "I don't even think Christianity has gotten the point of incarnation yet."

Richard Rohr: No, no.

Brie Stoner: We haven't even really even begun to let that sink in.

Richard Rohr: Yes. See, and it's no accident that Ilia is a Franciscan. We just absorb that, I think, if we get good training, and she obviously did.

Paul Swanson: How did the Western church get more aligned with Plato than Jesus in this process of history?

Richard Rohr: I don't know if this is the true answer; it's part of the true answer. You both know, of course, the New Testament was written in Greek and Hellenistic culture was

the superior culture of the Mediterranean world. Everyone, even the Romans, imitated the Greeks. Everybody wanted to be Greek because they, with good reason, exemplified supreme intelligence and sophistication. Even using the Greek language, the gospel just inevitably it seems, because of its historical and chronological situation, got filtered through a Greek philosophical lens.

The example that's usually used is logos, which is a Greek philosophical principal. You and I think it's a Christian principle. We were just pulling everything we could from Greek culture, because it dominated the field. If you were smart, you knew Greek and that's why even then twelve centuries later Thomas Aquinas could, with credibility, pull Aristotle out of the woods and redeem him, and we were just all ready to believe it because if it came from Greece it was high level.

Again, I think we have to admit that was in great part true. When I was in Greece a few years ago, I just looked up at the Parthenon, and I said, "My god, every great idea filtered through this culture." So, yeah, that became the matrix along with then Roman imperial matrix, the lens through which we first read the gospel. Put the two together, Greek logic which was largely dualistic for all of its brilliance, and Roman imperialism. That's how much, for me, Christ submitted to being human in all things, that even the historical situation that he knew would limit him. He let that happen too.

Brie Stoner: We've inherited some problematic things with those worldviews, though, and among that is that kind of static, binary division between spirit and matter that is so contrary to the very nature of reality, it seems, which is so evolutionary, and constantly changing, and spontaneous, and emergent. And so, one of the things that I love that you say, which feels to me so incarnational, is that we can't think our ways into new ways of living, we have to live our way into new ways of thinking.

Richard Rohr: Thinking.

Brie Stoner: That line of Jesus when he says, "Change your mind," the metanoia, you know. Change your worldview. Change how you see the world. I wonder if you could share how you see that process of change happening. Does it start with a new insight, or is it lived into through action? Is it both?

Richard Rohr: What comes into my mind, so I guess I'm supposed to say it, is what Cynthia has taught us about third force, that I do think someone or some movement emerges that's new, creative, exciting. Now what the cross told us is that even with the new incarnation, there would and always will be pushback against it. That's the doctrine of the cross, which was supposed to save us from cynicism. Death and resurrection is the pattern, what I call three steps forward, two steps backward, and that is so against the grain. That is so counterintuitive. I think I say in the book we needed a divine zinger to get the pushback message because especially we Western people with our philosophy of progress, we who have enjoyed success, security, advancement, technology, we're just progress people to the core and that means straight line forward. So, everything in us resists the two steps backward, the folly of the cross, but for me that's the genius of the gospel, that it's realism.

In fact, you can use this phrase. I don't think I used it in the book. I wish I had. I'm now thinking of the gospel as "tragic realism." If you want to put two words, tragic realism, not idealism. Well, there's certainly a goal, the kingdom of God, but it's not just a utopian vision, it's tragic realism. In the real, you can find God, but be prepared for that reality to punch you. I don't know why God did it that way, I really don't, but it's obvious. Look at the church today. Look at the United States of America. There is so much regression seemingly, it's hard to believe. Go ahead.

Brie Stoner: I was just thinking about the nature of fear around change and is that not so much of the pushback of the regression that you're describing is that deep down, we're creatures of habit? The forward, the new, the emergent is unknown and that feels to me like such a critical part of what you teach in the path of contemplation, which is acclimating to the unknown, getting used to not knowing so that we can—

Richard Rohr: Perfect.

Brie Stoner: --enter into new ways of knowing.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yeah, unless you have that humility about knowing. You know, I was reading Paulo Freire last week, and he talks about "circles of certitude," and they're equally on the right and on the left—self-affirming, enclosed circles of self-validating answers—and we all ensconce ourselves in circles of certitude instead of living in the naked unknowing of the middle. You said it already. I think we're creatures of habit. We love the familiar, and the unknown is always

Richard Rohr: scary, so you focused in on fear. So, once we learn to recognize the shape of our own fear, what does fear feel like in me? Until you know that, you will act out of it all the time. And look at American politics. It's just like teenagers, both sides yelling at one another and both afraid of losing.

When your only goal left is to win, your only great fear is losing, and that's a lot of fear. I don't know how God's going to get us through this. I was watching that CNN little clip on the growth of hate last night. It's not just in America. It's all over Europe right now too—antisemitism, neo-Nazis, all talking with such bravado. But you can tell they're scared little boys who are overcompensating for their fear. I don't know if I responded to your question. I hope I did.

Brie Stoner: Yeah, of course. I just am thinking about the passing of Father Thomas Keating and how he talked about how much of our motivations are driven by security, control, power. I feel it in myself as a mom even with my kids.

Richard Rohr: Oh, how could you not?

Brie Stoner: Even out of a good thing like your love, you feel so out of control to protect these beautiful little human beings that I want to just control the shit out of their universe. I had the crazy thought the other day of them driving, and I could seriously, this came to me at 1:00 in the morning, and I could not get back to sleep because all I could think about was—

Richard Rohr: Your little boy's driving a car—

Brie Stoner: --no. No!

Richard Rohr: --with sixteen-year-old hormones that are just—

Brie Stoner: Yeah, that instinct.

Richard Rohr: --making them reckless.

Brie Stoner: Oh, yeah, it's terrifying. So that instinct to control, that instinct to want to wield power, it's so primal, because it is so—

Richard Rohr: Primal.

Brie Stoner: --terrifying to be in the now and in that surrendered unknowing. Change is hard.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, trying to control the circumstances of the tragic realism. I think that phrase is so helpful—

Richard Rohr: I do too. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: --really wanting to take hold of that. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Tragic realism.

Paul Swanson: I think I'd rather take comedic realism, a comedy over the tragedy, but I don't think it's as truthful. Richard, going with the change theme here, can a person be a Christian and not be open to change?

Richard Rohr: I don't see how because otherwise you're saying-- We use phrases like "growth in holiness, deepening my relationship with Jesus." Those are very traditional pious phrases. They both imply change—growth in holiness, you know. Are we really to understand the great wisdom of Jesus and the gospel at an infantile level? And the fact that we've been content with that, that the way you understood the gospel story when you were a kindergartner is the truth. That's just produced such disastrous Christianity. I especially see it when I occasionally meet, I mean this, doctors, and PhDs, and engineers. They will write letters to me that show brilliant intelligence and then their theological question to me is still at the infantile level. How can they live with such schizophrenia, to be so smart over here and so childish over there?

Of course, I've come to believe that what you hear at your mother and father's knee, I know this doesn't help you as young parents, but is received at what we call the lower brainstem where logic does not apply: "Mama said this. Daddy said this. It's got to be true." You don't even know you've processed it at that level, which also is one reason you react against it so much at a certain point, because you know it's not real, this infantile understanding of things.

To answer your question, I do not think you can be a mature Christian—I'm not trying to judge people's morality or worthiness—but, no, until we become an adult Christianity, it's not Christianity that's going to help the world or help anybody else. It will remain, as it often is, highly narcissistic people hiding behind God talk, and God talk is an easy way to

feel strong and superior. It appeals to that same low-level brainstem. “I’ve got the ultimate power, God.” So use God language, and you can remain very, very self-centered. You’ve even fooled yourself.

Brie Stoner: It’s that relationship between that infantile state of dependency, and Christianity, and power seems to be so rampant right now in our culture.

Richard Rohr: So rampant.

Brie Stoner: I love this line that you say in your book. You say, “There is no such thing as a nonpolitical Christianity,” and it’s so obvious that we’ve lost a kind of planetary and cosmic worldview that you describe in this book in our faith, because everything that you see in politics is around these polarized issues that seem to have to do with what you’re describing, that infantile, “No, this is what this is.” “No, no, no, it’s this.” So, I guess I want to know is how does this universal Christ reality, this tragic realism, change how we interact as human beings, in politics, as Christians?

Richard Rohr: Good question. I hope that’s what the whole book is about, that reframes the gospel in the biggest frame we know. As you know, I think Jesus’s metaphor for the biggest frame is the reign of God, or the Kingdom of God. I’m not talking about something new, but every time you read the kingdom of God, read in the big picture, in the final picture. I hope when we understand the nature of the Christ, we’ve put the gospel in the biggest possible parameter of the cosmos.

We Catholics celebrated last Sunday the Feast of Christ the King, which was actually inaugurated by the Franciscans in the 1920s, but the official title of the feast is Christ the King of the Universe. That’s the official name, not coming from this notion of the cosmic Christ. It’s not the king of this world. As long as it’s this world, it’s geographical places that you’re king of. Once you’re king of the universe, king of the cosmos, you’re the one who names the pattern of everything. It refuses being parceled out when the very land we’re all walking on, and the Hindus are walking on the same land, and the Buddhists are walking, and the Jews are walking, and the Muslims are walking on the same Earth, and eating the same kind of carrots, and the same kind of onions as we are out of this same Earth, you’ve just got something that can’t be made parochial. It can’t be made tiny anymore. This is a universal truth.

So, that’s why I’m so glad the publishers finally chose that title, The Universal Christ. It’s going to be very hard to politicize; no, I should say you could still politicize it because, as you said, there’s no such thing as a nonpolitical—

Brie Stoner: You actually said that. It’s quite good.

Richard Rohr: I mean partisan politics, yeah. When we say “political,” all we mean is it recognizes there are power equations at work in everything—class, gender, money. This is the way human beings read reality, “Who’s got the power?” Listen to any conversation. That’s almost the only talk there is is who’s got the power and who doesn’t by reason of what they’re wearing, what they’re driving, where they live, how good looking they are. Jesus really did expose that demon, if I can call it that, by his three temptations in the desert. They’re all about misuse of power. So, thanks for seeing that. Once we say that, then that’s why I say there’s no such

thing as a nonpolitical Christianity. Politics is just recognizing the power equations at work.

Paul Swanson: To continue with that piece on politics and power and Christianity, I just want to read this short phrase from your book *The Universal Christ*:

Did you know that the first seven councils of the Church agreed upon by both East and West were all either convened or formally presided over by emperors? This is no small point. Emperors and governments do not tend to be interested in an ethic of love, or service, or nonviolence, God

Paul Swanson: forbid, and surely not forgiveness unless it somehow helps them stay in power.

Can you speak to how Christianity's relationship with power has influenced our theology and how that continues today in the Christianity that we find ourselves in?

Richard Rohr: As apparently I said there, this is no small point. So many people, even over the years people would come up to me on the road and say, "We remember 313." To many people, especially Roman Catholics, that just blows them out of the water, if they have any historical sense because they have no idea the alignment with empire that took place in the 4th century, and that we never really left it once we aligned with the palaces, and the kings, and the queens of Europe. I think of all the kings and queens that we've canonized saints, and there's no real evidence of sanctity. They're trying to canonize Isabel and Ferdinand now.

Brie Stoner: Oh, great.

Richard Rohr: She lived in Spain, you know.

Brie Stoner: I should be proud, but—

Richard Rohr: I'm sure they're fine people. I don't know much about their biographies but just because they were a king or a queen, talk about projection, and maybe she helped the poor one Sunday a month or so. I hope she did. But we're fascinated again by power, and we love to canonize. I'd like to list the amount of canonized kings and queens. I was just in Budapest, and there is the golden crown of Saint Stephen. I guess he's a saint because this cathedral is built here in his honor but, no, he was more the King of Hungary. I'm just using that point to illustrate how once we aligned with power.

If there's any possible good news we can draw out of this present pedophilia crisis, which I don't think we've seen the end of yet, the Catholic priest's ability to continue to think of himself as on a higher level by the clothes we wear, and the titles we're given, and the special lifestyle we're allowed, our word for that in the Church is clericalism. Clericalism is the Catholic form of patriarchy, but it all has been sanctified by, "Well, he's a priest." Those of you who aren't Catholic don't know how huge this projection is.

I remember at my first Mass in 1970—I just looked like a kid then. I was 26.—and these two older gray-haired men were my altar boys, and they both kept bowing to me and giving me the water and the wine, and everything in me just said-- Overnight I'm a priest, and I get all of this status, and all of this. It's not good for the ego of the male. And my men's work tells me that, that the male is so attracted to undeserved status and power, so when we give it

to the clergy, no wonder we didn't hear the gospel because they hadn't been cured of this or exorcised from this demon themselves. I'm not saying they were bad people,

Richard Rohr: but the Church was another status and security system. It wasn't the folly of the cross. It wasn't a path of descent. It was careerism and a path of ascent.

So, if this pedophilia crisis is going to take away from us the last remnants, it probably won't work, but God's trying. I'm not saying God caused the pedophilia crisis, but God uses everything. And I think there's a taking away of a real demon. Pope Francis is saying this. He calls clericalism "the cancer of the Catholic Church." The pope says that.

Paul Swanson: Wow. Wow.

Richard Rohr: "The cancer of the Catholic Church." Did that answer anything you said? You started with the seven councils. I'm just saying the pattern continues.

Paul Swanson: Right, you brought it into the modern era of how this continues to play out.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, alignment with the top, not the bottom.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: That relationship to power I feel also exists in how we cling to information as knowledge.

Richard Rohr: Sure.

Brie Stoner: One of the things I so appreciate about how you teach at the Living School is you talk about knowledge as a way of knowing through love and how Teilhard talked about that kind of knowledge of knowing through love, of that amorizing energy as being that which actually really transforms us. And that's not about power. That's not a—

Richard Rohr: No, that's it.

Brie Stoner: --transactional exchange of information: "I have this information, now I'm in the right."

Richard Rohr: "I'm in control."

Brie Stoner: "I'm in control. I have the right belief system or doctrine." And so, that's a radically different way of thinking about belief and even as a seminary student, it seems like so much of what is happening in seminaries now is arming people with a—

Richard Rohr: Arming.

Brie Stoner: --certain set of information, you know, as opposed to really trying to cultivate a radical transformation. I think about that as how Teresa of Ávila, she sets up this whole interior castle, trajectory of transformation, and your brain wants to turn it into power. You want to be like—

Richard Rohr: Yes, I know.

Brie Stoner: --"How do I get to the next stage? I'm going to climb into that. I'm going to get to that seventh mansion," but then at the end of all of it she says, "Now the goal of all of this is how can I best serve love? Look what love has done to me, and how can I best serve love?" Now that is transformation.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: That's not about information. I wonder if that was my barometer in life about that which really helps me know through love and makes me a transformed person in love, religion doesn't really help with that anymore. Why is that?

Richard Rohr: Theology without spirituality is dangerous. In the Alexandrian church, which was the more mystical of the Eastern church, for centuries and still, I think, in some traditions you can't be a bishop unless you're a monk first. That was their attempt to combine spirituality with theology. The bishops were only taken from the monks. And there were men who didn't come to be a bishop, they came for the search for God and assuming that that was their real concern. But when your life is not really a search for God but just God answers, God talk, which is personal empowerment, when I can talk with superiority, theology is dangerous for the soul, for the community. And you look at most of the theological arguments of the last 1,000 years, and they're all, "I've got the right information, and you don't have the right information."

Here's where contemplation really comes to play. If a contemplative moment is a moment where you say "yes" to what's in front of you, that you love it before you can know it, you understand? That's what the early Franciscans said, "Love precedes knowledge." We thought we were better than the Dominicans because the Dominicans said truth was higher than love. "No, no, no," we said, "Love is--" The very need we had to prove that we were right on love maybe gives away our bias too. But I think that's what contemplation teaches you, appreciation before critique, admiration before dismissal, or minimizing anything. That's what critique is, always minimizing things.

You can't be a negative, cynical person and be a contemplative. You just can't. They contradict one another. I hope I'm responding to your question. It's so important. Let me sum it up in this: You only really know what you love. Other things you do not know, you observe from a distance. The subject-object split is maintained but once you say "yes" to it and grant it subjectivity, and dignity, and honor, which is to love it, then you begin to know it, yes, in its frailness but also in its fullness. This is why contemplation is the change that changes

Richard Rohr: everything. When you see contemplatively, you see lovingly while not eliminating your critical mind. Your critical mind is subsumed under your appreciative mind. The "yes" precedes the "no."

Brie Stoner: You embody that so well, Richard, and—

Richard Rohr: Oh, I wish.

Brie Stoner: You shared this story with me, and I want to ask just a personal question, if you'd be willing. When we were driving back from Snowmass you talked about the moment when your superiors asked you, or encouraged you, to pursue a doctorate and your own personal decision to not go that route. Why did you decide not to go down that path?

Richard Rohr: First, I can tell you there was no great virtue in that. I can still see the spot in the seminary dining room where he pulled me aside, the systematics professor, and asked me if I'd want to do that. I had been, for thirteen years, in an all-male world of academics. I just wanted to get out of there. I really did. I just couldn't wait to start teaching, and preaching, and being with people, not that they weren't people, but the all-male system is just so self-enclosed. So, there really wasn't virtue but thank God the Spirit guided me, because if I had said "yes" to that, it would've been four more years of major studies and then it would have dictated the rest of my life. I would've had to pay back, in my own mind, for paying that much to educate me, "I better teach at a university," or something like that. New Jerusalem would not have happened. CAC would not have happened. The men's work would not have happened.

So, thank God that I was able to do much more pastoral work. I'm grateful for the academic education they gave me, which allows me to speak with a certain self-confidence, but thank God I didn't ensconce that, because you know what I've met in so many of my professors who had doctorates, not all of them because they had some wonderful exceptions, but they were forever writing and talking to their professors. You'd see it in their sermons. You're not talking to me. You're pleasing your professors by being academically correct, and they never get out of that. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: That's another fascinating relationship between power and theology and where we've kind of gotten away from love, the epistemology of love.

Richard Rohr: "The epistemology of love," what a good phrase. Yes.

Brie Stoner: I think you came up with that one too.

Richard Rohr: Oh, did I?

Brie Stoner: Seriously.

Richard Rohr: See, I'm just admiring myself.

Paul Swanson: Just going through all the Richard Rohr greatest hits.

Richard Rohr: All right.

Paul Swanson: It's been so helpful to have you talk about the danger of power in theology without spirituality and so much of spirituality, at least the way that I've learned from you from the way that you've taught it is through not only contemplation but just kind of minding your own experience and being in relationship to that.

Richard Rohr: "Minding your own experience." Good.

Paul Swanson: You use this phrase "the depths of things," like going to the depth of things, and I'm

wondering if you could unpack that for us. What does it mean to go to the depths of things, to experience them fully, even your mistakes, as a way on the path of transformation?

Richard Rohr: The depth of things is never the first visibility of things. It's never the first, "It means this." The first level we're calling transactional. It's all about what it can do for me, what's in it for me. How can I make money from this? How can this get me a doctorate, or whatever? So, the depth of things is letting go of those self-referential concerns and finding soul meaning, which is really to find the soul of the other thing, or person, or event, to go beyond, as Merton says, "the shadow and the disguise," because it is all shadowy and disguised. That's the wonder of the Christ mystery, that says Spirit is hidden inside of matter. If you stay at the materialistic level, you stay at the transactional level, and you can do that. Let's pick on the Eucharist, which we Catholics make so much of. It's just about proving that this bread is really Jesus, and because I believe it, I have jumped the leap, but maybe there's no capacity for presence.

If there's no capacity for presence, you can make the intellectual transaction in belief in the real presence. But presence is, you've heard me say this, a reciprocal concept, a mutuality, a giving and a receiving. Until you're capable of presence, that's the depth of things, not just proving that the bread is Jesus but letting the bread have life for you, speak to you, love you, affirm you, challenge you. That's the beginning of the inner dialogue. So, once you begin an inner dialog with things, you will soon meet the depth of things, which sort of never stops.

I don't know if you've gotten up to the chapter on "This is My Body" yet where I talk about this in the book, but I was amazed myself as I wrote that, "My, God, this mystery of the bread and the wine is a bottomless pit of meaning." Just "yes, yes, yes, yes," and I think of all the centuries we spent arguing about is it really Jesus, and who has the power to make it Jesus? Who doesn't have the power to make it Jesus? What a horrible waste of time. It's all power again.

Paul Swanson: There's something about what you just said, too, with presence. You cannot bring a conclusion with presence, because if you bring a conclusion, then you've already caved it all in.

Richard Rohr: You've closed it down.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

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

Paul Swanson: There's endless conclusions when you're present to the Eucharist.

Richard Rohr: Excellent. Excellent. Yes. You're led into the mists of mystery where there's always another level, another level. "How will God delight me today?"

Brie Stoner: It's interesting, as we've been talking about being able to live in that unknowing and presence as the same infinite field of possibility and—

Richard Rohr: Well put.

Brie Stoner: --you talk about, in chapter 8 of your book you talk about how the artist has a certain level of access to mystery, to presence, and to depth, and I know you're a lover of the arts and of artists, so I wonder if you could share how art forms part of your contemplative seeing in that way?

Richard Rohr: I've always loved beauty and art. It's the one thing over the years when I was on the road and I would have an afternoon off after a conference, I would almost always go to the local art museum. And it was something I could do by myself. Sometimes people were with me but even there we'd divide up. I think artists, because they're more intuitive, symbolic, and right-brain, are often the first to intuit—their mind doesn't fully understand it either—but they don't insist on full understanding before they write a piece of music, or they start painting. They trust the unconscious more, and that's what the engineer and the scientist just isn't trained to do. It's not his or her fault. They only proceed by evidence and by an ability to please their professors. I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful for that in my doctor that he proceeds with evidence. The artist is almost the first one after the mystic who intuits reality. I'm not saying everybody who's an artist. I mean, a lot of post-modern art and hard rock, if you don't mind me saying so, is—

Brie Stoner: Not your thing, Richard?

Richard Rohr: --it just seems chaotic, chaos to me, and I know I'm representing my generation, but just why would you want to enter into chaos? I'm not saying there can't be asymmetry as Stravinsky's music, but even inside of the asymmetry, there's

Richard Rohr: --harmony; there's coherence. My mind just insists on some incoherence [I think he means to say "coherence" here, not "incoherence" based on the context @ 48'20"] and, as you know, I'm going to say, which is precisely the ability to include a certain degree of incoherence. But when you make incoherence-- Is Jackson Pollock one of your artist friends? The first time I saw a Jackson Pollock—please, please, Jackson, forgive me. I'm not trying to put you down. I think you're even a Polish Catholic, aren't you? No, that was someone else. It feels like delighting in incoherence, and if you're a teenager looking for meaning, and this is what you first delight in, I don't think that's going to help you grow up, but that's just my opinion. That's just my opinion. Maybe an older person like I could look and say, "Oh, I like the colors," but, yeah. That's probably because I'm not educated in art. I just appreciate good art, that's all. Yeah, but I'd probably be old-fashioned. I like realism, and harmonious colors, and beauty, and so forth.

Brie Stoner: I know what I'm going to make you for Christmas now.

Richard Rohr: I can't wait.

Brie Stoner: Just like a lot of chaos on a canvas.

Richard Rohr: On a canvas.

Paul Swanson: I love it. I think in chapter 8, by another intuitive genius, Carl Jung, and the way that he worked with meaning, and consciousness, and unconsciousness, and collective unconsciousness. There's that inscription over his archway that when I first heard of it, I

loved it, and I was immediately drawn to it.

Richard Rohr: Did you? Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It's kind of taken on different meanings throughout different seasons in my own life. I'm curious for you, that inscription over his archway, which is, "Invoked or not invoked, God is still present," what does that mean for you, and how did that come to be a part of this chapter?

Richard Rohr: First of all, when I first remember quoting Jung, even in Switzerland when I was teaching a lot in Europe, I would get all these grimaces, because they had him written off as an anti-Christian and as an unbeliever. I said, "He's one of your own." I said to that the Swiss people. "No, we don't study Carl Jung." Of course, these were all Swiss Reformed Protestants who just—

Brie Stoner: Oh, boy.

Richard Rohr: --didn't know how to think symbolically, didn't know how to think intuitively. Darn! So, the reason I think it's such a wonderful quote is that he would-- Now I heard it was on his tombstone. Did you read over the archway? It doesn't matter.

Paul Swanson: I thought it was at the place he went to write.

Richard Rohr: Yes, Bollingen.

Paul Swanson: Yes, and I thought it was over the archway of—

Richard Rohr: Oh, maybe it is.

Paul Swanson: --that place where he would enter there.

Richard Rohr: I often get half of the fact correct—

Paul Swanson: I could be wrong.

Richard Rohr: --and half wrong. Editors have to correct all those things. It doesn't matter, but the fact that he would want, "God is present." This is a man who's experienced presence, and presence in such a wide field that he knows that it's not just the people who say the right words, those who invoke. There are people who don't invoke the God who experience the presence. You don't have Just This here, do you; my little book? No.

Paul Swanson: I don't think so.

Richard Rohr: You don't need it. The whole book begins with this wonderful quote from Isaiah. "I'm saying, 'Here I am. Here I am,' even to those who do not seek me, even to those who do not study me. I'm shouting, 'Here I am. Here I am.'" So, for me, Jung is just repeating what Isaiah said, and what Jesus said when he said, you know, it's not those who say, 'Lord, Lord,' but those who do it, who do the truth instead of those who speak true words. This is no small point. That's why you've heard me say secularism is the inevitable child of Christianity.

Once you get the incarnation, God doesn't really matter, I don't think. Who am I to say the mind of God, but I don't think God cares that you get God's name right, it's that you're in the flow.

I often watch nature shows on TV. And these people who care about armadillos, and they've given their whole life to study the lifecycle of an armadillo, and they weep when their pet armadillo dies, I'll take them any day over a stuffy Christian who doesn't love hardly anything, much less armadillos. It's astounding to me. Once you get the contemplative eyes, you can notice in a moment where the flow is at, and where there is no flow; people in the force field of love and people who are just religious. So, that's a big commentary. "Invoked or not invoked, God is still present." That's a genius quote.

Brie Stoner: Have either of you heard that story of Jung where somebody asked him, "Do you believe in God?" He said, "I don't believe in God, I know." And just speaking of that knowledge—

Richard Rohr: You can see it on film.

Brie Stoner: Oh, yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, and it's even more touching because he halts. This is the way I remember it. "I don't believe. I know." It was just very well said.

Brie Stoner: So profound but that seems to be the thread that's running through this entire conversation is that deep recognition that doesn't have to be placed in a category of power, certainty, belief systems. It's just an innate, like an inner response to what is ultimately true. You say this so beautifully in your book. You say that three key aspects of this path are respect, wonder, and reverence. I wonder if you consider those to be three components of the contemplative life?

Richard Rohr: Yeah, that's perfectly said. You've heard me say respect is to look at it a second time; re-spect. Wonder, that's the beginning of the religious instinct. If you've never had a moment where you want to kneel and kiss the ground, I don't think you're ready for God. If there's never been something that, "Oh, God, this is it. This is more than enough." What was the third word I used? Wonder?

Brie Stoner: Reverence.

Richard Rohr: Reverence. Yeah, yeah. Reverence. Who was the wonderful, I think it was Joseph Pieper, that man I met up at Santo Domingo years ago, he was a scholastic philosopher, and he has a whole book just on reverence, what it means to live in reverence before reality. He was a holy man.

Brie Stoner: There was a time when I was feeling so outside of the fold of Christianity, like I'd been kicked out of the Garden of Eden. I didn't fit into the institution.

Richard Rohr: Me too. Yes.

Brie Stoner: Somebody told me, passed along Abraham Joshua Heschel's line of—he's wonderful—but the definition of faith that he gives is "living with awe and wonder," and I thought, "Okay, I can do that whether I'm in an institution or not. I can dedicate my life to that kind of way—

Richard Rohr: To awe and wonder.

Brie Stoner: --of living,” yeah.

Richard Rohr: That’s, for me, the foundational religious instinct. I don’t trust religion. I am repeating myself now, but I don’t trust religion that doesn’t live in respect and wonder for the miraculous character of everything, but that’s always to see the depth of things again. If you don’t go to the depth, you don’t see it. Again, you know, I love animals, and I watch these nature shows. When I see how human beings mistreat animals, don’t you realize they’re totally helpless? Don’t you realize you’re totally in control, and they have no control, and you’re abusing that power for I don’t know what reason, but the basic religious instinct is not there. The depth of things, the goodness of things, the dignity of things, the this-ness of things. Thank you for getting it. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. To wrap up our session here, taking those three words, Richard, where have you experienced respect, wonder, and reverence as the Christ this past week?

Richard Rohr: You ask such good questions. It’s Wednesday, and on Wednesday morning I have the parish Mass here at Holy Family. These are mostly Mexican Americans, and in the old days we weren’t allowed to talk in the church. You had to come in silent. I go out a little early and sit in my chair waiting for the crowd to gather, usually about five minutes before seven. I just couldn’t help but recognize how each one as they came in had to shake the hands of every other person. They all know one another. They all smile at one another, but I wanted to weep for these humble people who don’t think they’re important at all, but the reverence they show to one another, and they’ll go out of their way. They got to greet everyone.

It’s, frankly, a little tiresome for a gringo, “Okay, let’s stop the greeting so Father can start his Mass.” It goes on and on, and as soon as I start, of course, they stop which, again, is a respect for me. It’s just there’s a holiness that is totally unrecognized. In fact, in the old church, we would’ve called I noisiness. It wasn’t holiness. If you were a good Catholic, you keep quiet in church. They aren’t quiet until the Mass starts then they’re quiet. It’s, yeah, a gift this morning already.

[music playing]

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