

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 2, Episode 7

The Path of Great Suffering

Paul Swanson: Welcome to Season Two of Another Name for Every Thing: casual conversations with Richard Rohr, responding to listener questions from his new book *The Universal Christ* and from Season One of this podcast.

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. I'm Brie Stoner.

Paul Swanson: And I'm Paul Swanson.

Brie Stoner: We're staff members of the Center for Action and Contemplation and students of this contemplative path trying our best to live out the wisdom of this tradition amidst planting Rose bushes, picking up another rotisserie chicken for dinner, and the shifting state of our world.

Paul Swanson: This is the seventh of twelve weekly episodes. Today, we're diving into your questions on a theme that unites us all: the path of great suffering.

Brie Stoner: So, Richard, we're going to spend some time this episode talking about *The Path of Great Suffering*. This was a very moving thing for Paul and I to read through so many questions and how vulnerable, honest, and heartbroken so many of our listeners are, and we were just so grateful at the vulnerability that they were willing to extend to us in sharing so much of their—

Richard Rohr: Yeah. There is so much mail I get like that.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. So, to kick us off Carrie from Baltimore, Maryland says:

As a person with a serious diagnosis, I valued what you said about dealing with your own health problems. It is scary and painful when a person's body does things they don't want it to do. My diagnosis is not life threatening, but it's still very sad for me. I cannot let myself devolve into 'Well, this is God's will for me,' or even 'There's a lesson in this, and I will learn to embrace it.' That makes me cringe. I can't embrace this, but I would like to feel more at peace with my fears and frustration. I hope you hear my grief and sadness in this and not an ego that is wounded. That's the other thing to set aside as I deal with this—the desire to control. Can you speak to how we can accept suffering without it becoming the trite response that it is God's will?

Richard Rohr: It seems the central suffering of suffering is the absurdity of it, that there isn't an obvious lesson, the nonsensical, there's no goal visible or obvious that you can find, and we're all so, "Well, if I had this purpose, I could achieve it." So, she's so right. We try to put a spiritual purpose on it.

Now, I'm not dismissing that spiritual purpose, but when it's too glib, too easily: "This is God's will for you." In my generation, "This is your cross to carry," was our immediate Catholic answer. I don't think people grew from it so much, and it made God into a puppeteer who was always trying us with trials, not the inference of love into our life at the entrance of trial into our life. I don't know to what degree God is involved in it, but we have to say, God certainly is allowing suffering, negativity, death.

Why does God allow it? It seems that it's the necessary push back in the whole movement forward of personal evolution and historical revolution. There has to be loss; there has to be absurdity; there has to be tragedy. I mean, is there a single novel that we take seriously that is not about tragedy in some way? And it's our dealing with that by which people come to depth, to wisdom, and to love. Now, does God maneuver that whole affair? I don't know. I know many people afterwards say it feels like it. I say that now after the several brushes with death I've gone through. I look back and I say, "Oh, you allowed her to come and just the right time," or, "it wounded me just enough without destroying me." So, I can enjoy the grace of it, but it's always after the fact.

Richard Rohr: When you're in the middle of it, it just feels like hell; inconvenience. Why me? You get into the self-pity thing real easily. But she's real upfront about this temptation: "It's very sad for me. I cannot let myself devolve into this as God's will for me," or even "There's a lesson in this." She's avoiding glib religious responses. That means she's holding it rather than resolving it. And, as you well know, I've always seen the cross as the holding, not the resolving, the very gesture of two nailed hands is, "I'm here with it," and the the women standing at the foot of the cross, not wailing, not trying to protest—at least in the accounts we have—just standing there; holding. It's a learning of the meaning comes from the holding itself, the time experience itself. And beyond that, I don't know what to say except that the holy, and wise, and compassionate people I've met in my life have always gone through it at least once, usually more than once.

Brie Stoner: I so appreciate that she names that the other thing that she's learning to set aside in the midst of her suffering, is the desire to control—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: --and how suffering puts us in touch with how much of our lives we live with the illusion that we can create control, or that we are in control. And it seems like that's one of the painful gifts of suffering is that it wakes us up to the recognition of "I can't change this. I'm not in control. I'm not in control." And so, then I think in some ways that answer, "Oh, well, it's God's will" is almost like the human projection of like, "Well, if we're not in control, somebody has got to control this, because otherwise how do I trust? How do I relax into it"? So, it gives me compassion for the ways in which a lot of well-intentioned people, meaning well, will say things like that when you're going through suffering like, "Oh, well, it must be God's will," or "I'm sure this is going to mean something one day." When you're in it, that's not helping.

Richard Rohr: The existence of suffering in this world is very clearly saying God is not in control, and the fact that we projected that God always was almighty has done us a real disservice. And that's why for me, the cross is the symbol of God not being an almighty God, but an all-suffering God. It doesn't resolve it, again, but it softens it. If God is participating with us in solidarity, in the suffering, somehow I can bear it. My grasp around it is softened.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It's that difference between what you were saying, Brie, right, the person who comes in and says, "This is God's will" versus someone who comes and just sits with you in that tragedy and is not looking to resolve it for you, not looking to explain it away, but just sits in that grief with you.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. That's good.

Paul Swanson: Continuing on this theme of suffering, Ross from Manhattan, Kansas asks:

How do we think about suffering in the midst of a Christ-soaked world? Don't we just end up effectively saying that Christ animates suffering and bad as much as life in goodness?

Richard Rohr: I'll tell you, that really fascinates me. I've never had anybody state it that way: "Christ animates." That means gives soul to suffering and bad. I think he's right. I think he got it. Of course, he's a Kansas boy. We're always a few steps ahead of everybody [laughter] right down the road from where I grew up. I mean, I'm just learning from it as I read the words again and again: Aren't we effectively saying that Christ animates suffering and bad? He gives soul to it. That's what animation means.

Brie Stoner: I think that's an interesting spin because when I first read it, I interpreted animates as "is causing it," but I like the distinction you're making, and I think maybe that's the interesting spin that you're finding is that if we say animates as meaning gives soul to, or weaves soul--

Richard Rohr: Oh! I know Latin too much.

Brie Stoner: Stop being so smart.

Richard Rohr: That's the reason. Anima became alma in Spanish. Yeah. It was anima in Latin.

Brie Stoner: So, that makes sense to me. When you say it's about giving soul to, or weaving soul into, I can feel Christ in that.

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah.

Brie Stoner: But if it's about causing—

Richard Rohr: But I guess we don't really know what Ross meant, do we? He might mean what you said, but we don't want to say Christ causes suffering. He uses it and allows it if that's what he's asking.

Paul Swanson: Uh-huh.

Brie Stoner: This next question is painful and hard, and I think illustrates so much of what we experience when we're in the midst of suffering. This is Nick from Australia. He says:

The idea of resurrection in a universal way has been growing in me for years. I understand it and can even see it in life all around. It feels like I am in an extended Holy Saturday since having to let go of my work as a school chaplain. I have a sense of loss-ness and of being outside my community. I also have a sense of blame and anger toward those who seem to ignore my sense of how chaplaincy could look outside traditional boundaries and box ticking. I still have to live in the same place and my kids go to this school, but I feel like I am broken. How does forgiveness set us all free here? How can I find a way forward that's not bitter or victimized? Where are

you, resurrection?

Richard Rohr: Wow. So how do you still find solace even when we feel isolated? Well, you can't self-ender consolation. You can hope for it; you can even intentionally choose it. But he seems to read himself very well: "I'm in an extended Holy Saturday".

I can think of experiences where, particularly with communities, churches where decisions are made that are painful or where maybe the church community takes a direction that's not the direction that you believed in, or that feeling that he's describing like he's on the outside now, and yet he still has to continue to be enmeshed in this community. I can feel that anguish that he's pointing to.

Yes. He's still in the middle of it. He is in Holy Saturday, but that he knows it and could take time to name it, admitting his own weakness, all the elements are there for resurrection. It's just time now, it would seem to me, the fact that he doesn't want to be bitter and can recognize the state of victimization as a dead end. I don't think he's going to end up there. That's easy for me to say. I'm an outsider, but I can see why he was a chaplain. Isn't it painful when it's the belief community? I take that to be the case. Maybe it was a Catholic school or Christian school, that they are the ones who caused the pain.

The cross is usually caused by your in group, sometimes by the out group, and I think that was the whole symbolism of Peter betraying him; Judas betraying him; the apostles running. That's the betrayal that hurts: "I thought you were my friend." I get hate letters, you know, and people who I don't know, I don't care that much. It hurts for 10 seconds, but then I'm over it. But, the loneliness of suffering, because those who I thought I was in union with, in fact, never really understood me, at least that's your fear. Then "Is there something wrong with me," or "What did I do wrong"? He's going to go through all kind of levels of self-doubt, self-critique, anger, blame. The easy way is to blame somebody else, but he's already recognizing the need for forgiveness. I think we have been very weak on teaching the absolute centrality of forgiveness to understanding the Gospel.

Richard Rohr: It's not that you might need to do it, it's in this experience that you found your life in a different place. You have to be betrayed at least once. I think so, if I can make a dogmatic statement. Forgive me for sounding dogmatic. You have to be used, hurt, wounded. That's the whole meaning of Jesus in his resurrected state, in every gospel, carrying his wounds. He's saying, "This is part of the deal." And we call that in men's work "the sacred wound," the wound that is not projected elsewhere, is not used to feel sorry for the self, but becomes the way through. So, he's turning his wound into a sacred wound, I think.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, you can really hear the anguish. And I think about the seasons of life where there is that portrayal and then also your prayer even hurts because it's just longing; it's just groaning. Right?

Richard Rohr: That's good, Paul.

Paul Swanson: The way he even names it: "Holy Saturday. Is Easter Sunday ever going to come"?

Richard Rohr: Uh-huh.

Brie Stoner: Speaking to that longing, in our previous episode when we were spending some time talking about embodiment, and I feel like we're very anemic in understanding the ways in which grief is very physical, as well, and for that reason, seem to not remember that we need to take care of our bodies while we're going through experiences of deep grief and suffering, and how important it becomes to move your body, to go for a walk, to feel connectivity with more than just what has happened to you. I know Cynthia Bourgeault tells a story of her teacher sending her out to just chop wood: "Now you need to go chop wood," and making that a spiritual practice of conscious labor, of moving the body, of breathing, of doing something physical, exerting yourself a little bit as a recognition that this vessel that you're in is also experiencing the grief. I don't know. I feel like I really wish in the moments of great anguish in my life, I wish that I had had more people pointing me toward the body because it in a way it's like not trying to solve it, but just another way to be with, another way to be in that liminal space.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. You hear about animals, right, after they go through a traumatic experience, they'll lay down, and shake, shake.

Richard Rohr: Birds will shake it off. Uh-huh.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Paul Swanson: So helpful. Here's a question that I think made both Brie and I weep from Doug in Ames, Iowa. He says:

Thank you for these tremendous podcasts and for everything that you do for so many people. After one has experienced tremendous loss in one's life and is blessed with the opportunity to hit a low point, how does one continue to stay low, so to speak?

Richard Rohr: How beautifully put.

Paul Swanson: I'll elaborate a little bit more from my standpoint. We lost our-- four-month--

Richard Rohr: Four-month—

Paul Swanson: We lost our four-month-old son, Ben, to a terrible disease, had our rainbow daughter, Caroline, about eight months later only to find Caroline has the same terrible disease Ben had—

Richard Rohr: Oh, no. No.

Paul Swanson: --which is pulmonary vein stenosis. Caroline lives today at almost three-and-a-half years of age, truly as a testament to God's healing grace. My journey through this brought me so far down into such a place of helplessness, especially after we found out Caroline had PVS, that I had felt my heart open up to so many. My empathy improves so, so much. However, our

society, media, and life in general challenges me to keep this open heart of mine as open as I'd like it. How do we humans focus to do the work to sustain this openheartedness? Again, thank you for all you do and how you've helped so many, including me.

Richard Rohr: God, that he has enough space in his heart to want to thank me at the beginning and the end when he's gone through so much.

Richard Rohr: How do we keep it?

I hope this doesn't sound like a glib answer, but you've heard me say that the fruits of love and suffering can only be maintained by some contemplative practice. So he's been brought low, he doesn't want to lose what he's learning there, and he's absolutely right in that, so unless he can find something to protect the natural tendency for his heart to close down, to become cynical, and then you see people worried about lesser things, or seeking power, or money, and fame, and all of it just seems so superficial and selfish. Because you've gone through this transformative experience, it's very easy to get righteous and judgmental about people who are, "You think you have something to cry about," you know, that kind of attitude, and you're right, but don't go there. And you've got to notice when you're doing that: "My suffering is greater than your suffering," and it is probably, but don't let it become a weapon. Don't let it become ammunition to make yourself the enlightened one by reason of I've suffered greater. I don't see that anywhere in his language here, but since he's asking, "How do I keep this heart space open?" those will be the temptations to harden, harden his heart.

Very often—I hope this isn't the case either, but maybe you've heard—very often when couples lose a child, they take it out on one another. They're both hurting so much. They've lost so much together and, again, that scapegoat mechanism has to go somewhere. So, that would just be one warning I'd give. I hope we don't lose Caroline too, but when couples find themselves with the children out of the room, can you imagine the tendency to just, "If only you had--." I haven't been married, but I would think you would do that. So, it's just a warning with no indication that—what's his good name—Doug; Doug would do that.

Paul Swanson: What does that look like for you, Richard, knowing that we're all inundated with so much of the suffering in the world, how do you help keep that space open and in your own heart, too, to be able to let that impact you and how you participate in the world and serve and love others?

Richard Rohr: I honestly feel, just last night watching the news, like I'm doing that less and less well. It's just how much absurdity can the world carry? Every single story on the local news and the national news is of human cruelty and gratuitous human cruelty, just people going in and shooting up stores. Where is this coming from? Has it always been that way? Has it always been the gratuity of it, killing people that you don't even know; you don't even have a grudge against? "But my inner wound and anguish is so great, I've got to take it out on an anonymous object." I don't understand it. And, again, very often, not always, the people in power—at least in last night's news—in the army or in the police force, were just as bad as the victims. So, it's not like one side's always glorious and the other side is always terrible. It's like this poison is everywhere. My prayer this morning was just, "Show me how to draw upon a deeper love. I choose to draw upon a deeper love, because it isn't coming to

me naturally right now.” There’s an anger at the world. Our mistreatment of refugees, our mistreatment of almost everybody but white, rich people. I mean, it’s coming down to that. What has the “land of the free, the home of the brave” become? I’m showing you that I’m not dealing with it very well right now.

I’m feeling heartbroken, mind broken by what the world has become in my lifetime, because I grew up in the 60s where it was all the opposite. It was all, “Everything’s getting better and better and better,” and it was so hopeful—Vatican II, Civil Rights Movement, antiwar movement—and now here we are in white privilege and racism all over again. It’s heartbreaking. So, I hope I’m not adding to your pain, but this must have been the absurdity that not just Jesus himself felt, but the Twelve, and the women, and it’s come to this? Were we just kidding ourselves? And I’ve had those thoughts: “Am I just creating a wishful thinking worldview in all my books and talks about resurrection, and grace, and love? Am I just whistling in the dark”? I do think that sometimes, and then I get even more hopeless that this is all a made-up story that I’m using to convince myself.

Brie Stoner: I think you’re embodying the importance of owning grief and doubt as part of the process of resurrection, that to just glibly try to bypass, or jump over, or dismiss, or downplay the very real suffering that’s somehow woven into the fabric of this cosmos would be to deny it, would be to deny this very cosmos, would be to somehow not participate in it.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Well said.

Brie Stoner: And I think there’s something about grief at this level of suffering. I think about Doug and it’s like he has Caroline now to look to in this way of appreciating the miraculous. What an absolute lens cleanser where so much of us are living entitled and blind, unaware of all the privileges that we take for granted. You know, here’s Doug and he’s got this child that now reminds him on a daily basis in his grief of the loss of his son to live from a level of, “I want to stay awake. How do I stay awake? How do I not miss this”? It’s deeply moving for me. It makes me think how much more we need to be listening to the suffering. We need to be listening to those on the margins. We need to be paying attention to those who are fully awake because their grief has made them so.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. There’s this essay by this author, Silas House, and the title, which I love so much, is The Grief of Loving You.

Richard Rohr: The grief of loving—

Paul Swanson: And I just think that’s just a pithy connection of it all, right?

Richard Rohr: It just puts so much together. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Tracy from Charlottesville. Virginia says:

My question is probably one of theodicy: How do you explain when great suffering results in a person decompensating, or narrowing, being essentially spiritually or emotionally destroyed? My mom was mentally ill. she died a month ago. Great suffering contributed to her jettisoning community and becoming more narrow, and dualistic. How am I fortunate enough to find suffering transformative, but the same seems to irreparably damage others?

Richard Rohr: That is so true; the same suffering. I've met in the same family two kids who will have absolutely different responses to the same absurdity, whatever it might be, and she's seeing it. It must be very painful that it was her own mother.

I don't-- Is one of theodicy-- And as you know, theodicy is the whole science of God and suffering, God and death. However, it seems like it'll never stop, but I keep coming back to we can't keep thinking of God as almighty. That's what creates so much of the problem. Now, I know logically, rationally, isn't that what it means to be God, to have gotten this whole thing started and to be in control of everything? Why does this apparition of a suffering God come into our lens and we call it Christianity, but Christianity still mostly teaches an absolute omniscient, omnipotent God, and it does seem to be the event of suffering is what separates people into the line of enlightenment and the line of disillusionment. Here's what I want to say for sure: Those who are disillusioned by it, that doesn't mean their lost.

It doesn't mean they're going to hell. It doesn't mean God doesn't love them, but they apparently have missed a major opportunity to enjoy God, life, love, now. They've put it off for a while for whatever reason. So, maybe that helps a little bit, too, to not think that your mother, if she was mentally ill, something had come into her life that she could not handle, that she could not process. God must understand that ten times more than we do, why her mind could not deal with something. And, of course, it might've been a physiological something too. But at any rate, it's certainly no reason for dismissal, or exclusion, or pity for her mother. I don't hear her doing that. Well, it does say she jettisoned community and became more narrow, so I guess that's her pain to see what her mom did.

Brie Stoner: It is painful what she brings up is the reality that sometimes it seems like arbitrarily even suffering will make one person open up more, and soften up more, and be more vulnerable, and for other people it seems to shut them down more, harden them, spiral out more. And I can feel the loss of control in that question, like, why is that? Like, you know, what causes that? It reminds me of that story I was telling about the tree falling in the yard. It's like, well, what made it live and what made it die? Like what made it go this way and not that way? And I can feel the anguish of not knowing, just not knowing what causes some people to open and some people to shut down.

Paul Swanson: I just had this image of this guy I met a long time ago, but he had done a few tours in Iraq, and I was there when his mother asked him about that experience, and he said, "Those experiences are in a box in the back of my brain that I have locked. I'll never open the key, because it was so painful." But how has that suffering locked him down? [I've had] friendships with others who have served, like there's a vet who comes to morning sits sometimes and his own experiences have opened him up in that way. Like, how does war have that impact on people where someone can't even like begin to heal from that, and another can have that brokenness turn into something transformative; a pathway towards transformation?

Paul Swanson: It's just the absurdity of it.

Richard Rohr: If I had another lifetime, I would love to seriously create liturgies of lamentation for experiences like this. There has to be a place where they can be publicly named, grieved.

Now, this has emerged in the secular world with these discussion groups, sharing groups, support groups, twelve step groups, now restorative justice groups. So, the secular world is discovering it because the church hasn't. It's, again, how the Spirit works. We miss our vocation to heal and to know how to lament because our job was to forgive sin, not really to heal the wounds of sin, at least that's the way Catholic priests saw their job. Liturgies of lamentation are the next stage in church growth, I think—one, one facet.

Brie Stoner: I think one of the things that your book *The Universal Christ* is opening up for us is maybe a step toward that healing of recognizing, okay, if we're all in this body of Christ, if we're all in this together, that idea that we've been talking about, that nothing is lost or wasted, it gives me a place where I can grieve what I can't understand about some of the losses in my own life, of why did that have to happen, or why this and not that, or why did this person shut down and not open up? It's, it gives me a place to hold it and say we're still in this together; nothing of their life was lost or wasted. It begins that conversation. It begins that movement for me to rest in the Universal Christ, to rest in this knowledge, or belief that we really are all in this together, and that somehow nothing's falling through the cracks; no one is falling through the cracks.

Paul Swanson: That tees up this next question so well from an anonymous friend that connects to one of the patterns that you laid out in the book, Richard. They say,

After thinking for a bit, I wonder now if the rising numbers of those who suffer from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, as well as the higher and higher rates of suicide, relate to a feeling of being stuck in the second box—

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes.

Paul Swanson: --in the disorder? How do we help those stuck in that place of disorder, especially to the extent that they are hopeless enough to harm themselves and invite them into a reordering, into the incarnational way, especially those who maybe were never given an order and are constantly grasping to get there?

Richard Rohr: The first thing that hits me in hearing that is whoever wrote it that they get that analysis—order, disorder, reorder. How do you help people who are trapped in disorder and revel in disorder? That's much of America today, certainly the youth culture. As much as I praise the millennials, so many of them almost have disdain for anything that is order. Disdained don't you dare try to tell me there's, there's a level of order and until they get over that disdain for order, and I've got to add to it, if this sounds self-serving, forgive me, disdain for authority, leadership, tradition: "I will not allow there to be good eldering I will not allow there to be good tradition; in fact, I will do my best to tear it down." You can just see them sitting there waiting to shoot you down: "How dare you say there's meaning.

That's your meaning, and I refuse to accept that meaning because it's just your meaning and your group." And they're half right, but what is this resistance to meaning, if you follow the point I'm making? Yeah, I've experienced this with so many people and in my generation, too, it just takes different issues. They're afraid you're putting legalism or church attendance back on them. That's not what you're saying at all. So, to submit to a fundamental, childlike—and I intentionally use the word childlike—order that makes the world okay is a

huge leap of humility for modern people, even more for postmodern people: “No, don’t you dare tell me. I will not be naive. I will not be used again. I believed that stuff once.” And I can really understand that, but they’re trapped in this reveling in cynicism;

reveling in the demon of dismissal. It’s so superior to dismiss things, to sit there, one thing after the other. And, when you can stop doing that-- I’m not telling you to be naïve, but I am inviting you into a second naivete. It’s different than the first naivete: “I know all the absurdity. I’m willing to struggle with the nonsensical character of everything. I’ve been hurt myself, and I still opt for life, and love, and goodness.” That’s “reorder.” I mean, he or she is really asking the big question for this period of history. In most of previous history and Jesus’ lifetime, how do we get people out of the box of “order,” which was legalistic, and unreal, and impossible—get them out of order. Now, it’s get them out of “disorder.”

Brie Stoner: So, it seems like we’ve lost a lot of the-- I think part of what I’m locating as part of the causal point of so much of the anxiety and depression in our time is the loss of the institutions that used to create coherence for us, that used to give us a healthy, coherent worldview. And so, with the decline of those institutions, with the decline of that, this fragmentation of our worldview that you’re talking about, this postmodern: “Everything is relative. There is no one truth. There’s no one thing. There’s no universal message,” has left many of us feeling like “I can’t go back to the belief system of my childhood because that was too narrow--

Richard Rohr: That’s first naivete.

Brie Stoner: --and I’m stuck in the sense of disorder of, like, “Well, that didn’t work, and I know that doesn’t fit anymore,”

But, I think many of us have been hungering for “I want to believe in a coherent worldview, but I need it to incorporate more than the first one did.” And that’s, I think, part of this movement with this teaching in the universal crisis. I think from a theological standpoint, we really need more coherent worldviews that encompass cosmology and positive anthropology, you know, because otherwise we’ve got nowhere to go. We stay stuck in this disorder place because we can’t fit in the shoes that we outgrew of the more narrow, faith-based coherences that we grew up with.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: Uh-huh.

Brie Stoner: So, speaking to that kind of collective, universal view and coherent-making paradigm—

Paul Swanson: Can I just say, something you said just really struck me regarding the struggle, right? It’s a struggle to live a meaningful life or to find meaning in a way where, as you said, it was being handed on before, like this is the meaning that you should aspire to or connect to, and that’s been let go of. But now it seems to be in that midst of trying to reframe meaning and trying to relate to it in a new way, and it is going to be struggle. Like, our previous history of having to be an easy meaning that was given to us no longer works, and now we’re blazing our own trail of the struggle of meaning in a way that we potentially haven’t had to do before when we were growing up, because it was handed to us.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: Uh-huh.

Paul Swanson: So, it is a new practice for those of us who are seeking a new way of connecting to a coherent universe.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. Oh, yeah, and it almost seems as though the meaning we're learning to live into now is one of process—

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: --which is what I hear you say, like, "God is in this with us." Therefore, we can't just jump ahead to an outcome of heaven or hell. It's how do we trust meaning in the midst of not knowing, which is much harder?

Richard Rohr: Much harder.

Brie Stoner: Much harder. So, Peter from London asks:

You talk about suffering including mentioning the three wonderful Jewish women—Etty Hillesum, Simone Weil, and Anne Frank—I understand how my suffering connects me to the world and that God suffers too. It is new to me to think about how I can help God with God's suffering. Could you please explain this a little bit more?

Richard Rohr: It's an astounding concept, isn't it?

I think it demands a high degree of love. Again, as long as God is the puppeteer and the almighty one and we are the victims of his choices—and he is usually a he in that paradigm—to actually be so in connection with this God that you can allow God to be vulnerable before his own creation—not suffering for it but in it. Change the preposition. This is, as you know, why I'm so hard on the atonement theory and people wonder why, because it was all God is suffering for, which really kept the subject/object split. We were the object of God's suffering and the cause of it. In many of our churches, your sin causes God's suffering. Do you see how this is 10 levels beyond that, to say I just want to lessen God's pain, and the only way I can do that is, as Paul says in Colossians, is to make up in my own body that all Christ still has to suffer.

That's the most clear line for the sake of the whole body, but you only see that in rare people. The reason I had to mention it in this book is because here they are all women and all Jewish, and it's sort of a necessary humiliation to Christians who never think of God is suffering in them and with them, although we should have been given that direct lesson from the cross, but instead we made the cross into a transaction. Dang it! Once it's a transaction, the distance between God and the soul is maintained: oh, he's being nice to us, but he's not with us, and in us, like us. That's what the cross was meant to say to humanity: "God is in us, with us, like us, not just for us." So, the "for us" was celebrating the magnanimity of God, which we're all grateful for.

I'm not throwing out the "for us," but when it's limited to that, you know, that's why you,

you outgrow your parents in a way. I like mother always helping me, but how wonderful it's going to be when your kids come back to you as adults and you can walk at their side and let them give to you. Oh, that must be a wonderful experience that I don't have to be the helper. He wants to help me. So, once you state it at that level, it makes total sense. So, it tells me that, that Etty, and Simone, and Anne Frank were at that level of "I want to help God back." Now, this is adult Christianity even though it's ironically adult Judaism. And maybe I shouldn't say "ironic," because we're a child of Judaism, and I love to say it that way: "We're a child of Judaism." And just as maybe a small percentage of Jews got it—but most of the prophets—that's the level they were at.

They wanted to lessen the suffering of God by telling Israel how stupid it was: "Join with me in lessening the suffering of God by healing the world." Oh, it's just high-level love. I bet you as adults with your own parents, isn't it nice to go home and do something for dad or mom in their old age? Oh, it was such a delight. Well, I mean, my dad drove me all my life, and loved cars, and was a good driver when he was such an old man that he couldn't drive well and I got to drive him, I just felt so, "Oh, this is so neat." Why was that so neat? I don't know except finally the playing field of love is somehow equaled, and that's the equality of lovemaking that Jesus gave us through the incarnation: that we matter, our love matters, our giving matters, and God wants us and allows us to give back to God and, apparently, God takes some kind of delight from that as you will from your kids, a whole different kind of delight, and as you take when you give it to your parents.

Thank you for centering in on that. Thank you. For me, it's one of my more central points in the book. The big, fancy word for that in theology was patripassianism, the father suffers. And and at a certain point, I think it was in the first millennium of Christianity, patripassianism—I don't know if I'm even pronouncing it right—was condemned. You may not say that the Father suffers, only Jesus suffered. See, I think that was wrong. Someone who was teaching patripassianism was right. It's a suffering God. Jesus is not different than the Father. The Father is not different than the Spirit. They learn it from one another. The whole Trinity is the suffering of God. Jesus just makes—or Christ in Jesus—just makes it visible, tangible, touchable, so forth. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: To kind of set up our closing, I've found that, for whatever reason, I have a place that I tend to fall apart, which is my kitchen floor. I don't know if it's because that's usually when the kids are in bed, and they're down, and I'm cleaning up the kitchen, that is the point in the day when, if I'm experiencing grief, I can finally let it out. And I'm fascinated by the relationship of that point when we finally break down and are finally vulnerable enough to cry, to weep, that those are the moments of my most honest prayers where it's just bare heart to God asking for help without any eloquence whatsoever. And with a deep recognition of my own brokenness, my own imperfections, my own faults as well as my own grief that I carry. So, as a set up to our question, I wondered if, Richard, if you have a place that—

Richard Rohr: A place.

Brie Stoner: --a place, well, a place where you break down and maybe what your most recent kitchen-floor moment has been?

Richard Rohr: You know, it's so funny, I have a niece who years ago shared almost an exact thing. She

had one of her children—she had five children—who just would not stop crying morning, afternoon, and night. Can you imagine? Well, you can as a mother, the sense of helplessness: “What am I doing wrong”? And she told me one night how she finally got this little boy to go to sleep, and she just fell on the kitchen floor in front of the refrigerator and just sobbed, just sobbed, in a complete mess of helplessness. I remember feeling for her. What could I say? What can I do? But if I had any such experience, you know, a place in my little house, my little Hermitage where I live, the exact spot where I had the heart attack, is my prayer place. That’s where I sit, and I thought I was having a holy experience.

[laughter]

Brie Stoner: Oh, my god. Only you, Richard, only you.

Paul Swanson: Your heart was on fire.

Richard Rohr: And then it got painful, and It didn’t go away. I waited about thirty minutes and then I called a staff member: “I think I might be having a heart attack.” Since then, that has become the place where it’s safe for me to feel almost anything—self-hatred, self-pity—it’s really safe. And I keep thinking another heart attack is going to happen in the same spot. The way your mind works is silly. But it’s like I died here once, as it were, and then I didn’t die. They drove me to the emergency room, even correcting me all the way: “You call an ambulance the next time.” Well, I don’t want to die in an ambulance. I want to die with a friend next to me. So, it all worked out, but because I went through that whole thing, my kitchen floor is this place in my little house where, and this is just a recent experience, where I passed over somehow from death to life. And ironically, that seems like a safe place now. Well, I did it here once, I can do it again.” It’s very unusual. I was sitting there this morning. I do almost all mornings. So, I don’t know if that’s an answer.

Brie Stoner: No, it is. Thank you, Richard.

Paul Swanson: It’s a beautiful answer. Thank you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: You’re welcome. Thank you for asking such good, juicy questions.

Brie Stoner: Also, I really hope that you don’t have a spiritual heart experience anytime soon; just a little bit longer.

[laughter]

Paul Swanson: And that’s it for today’s episode of Another Name for Every Thing with Richard Rohr. This podcast is produced by the Center for Action and Contemplation thanks to the generosity of our donors.

Brie Stoner: The music you are listening to is provided by Birdtalker. If you’re enjoying this podcast, consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend to help create a bigger and more inclusive community. To learn more about Father Richard and to receive his free daily meditations in your electronic mailbox, visit <https://cac.org/>.

Paul Swanson: To learn more about the themes of The Universal Christ, visit <https://universalchrist.cac.org/>.

Brie Stoner: From the High Desert of New Mexico, we wish you peace and every good.