

**ANOTHER  
NAME  
FOR EVERY  
THING**

with

**RICHARD ROHR**

Season 3, Episode 6

The World, The Flesh, and The Devil

Paul Swanson: [music playing] This was a fun conversation that I did not originally see as being fun, as we discussed with Richard “The World, the Flesh, and the Devil,” because we talk about sin, which, Brie, I don’t think we really talk about much in Christian circles.

Brie Stoner: I can’t imagine why you wouldn’t find this conversation fun, Paul. You don’t like talking about evil? That’s not fun for you?

Paul Swanson: Not fun for me. I’m just not as big of a sinner as you are.

Brie Stoner: Oh, good one! I appreciate that. No, but for any of you who have grown up in the Christian tradition, whether a Protestant, or a Catholic, this concept about sin and evil is a big one, right? For many of us, it’s the very central piece to how we oriented toward our faith. We thought it was all about sinfulness and being saved from sinfulness.

Paul Swanson: Right. It can be that heavy thing that just hangs over our entire religious experience is—what do we do with sin, how to become less sinful, how to be perfect as Jesus is perfect, and it’s setting you up to fail in a lot of ways. And I love the way that Richard helps us redefine sin and evil in the world, because for me, again, it highlights that part of the air we breathe is this complexity of being human in an absurd reality a lot of the time.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. And it’s tricky, right? Because as we look at the ways in which there is this systemic evil that’s at play in our world, there’s a certain level of acceptance of that where we have to say, “All right. There’s something about this plane of existence that requires a certain level of friction, and contradiction, and opposition. And yet, in the midst of that, is the opportunity for us to participate in manifesting the next, the new, the kingdom of God, even at hand, even in this mess.”

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Even as we participate in systems where we are complicit with these big evils, these systems that go unchecked and yet, there’s still beauty, and goodness, and truth that we’re also participating in, and it’s the mystery we’re wrapped up in.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Find this episode helpful as we dive into “The World, the Flesh, and the Devil.”

Richard Rohr: Do you know what I was just thinking? Even though God has blessed us thus far, let’s offer a little prayer before we enter into this huge and important material.

All holy and good God, we thank you for the privilege of being able to talk about such things, daring to do so. I thank you for two such people as Paul and Brie, and the safety and the love they hold as a container. May we fill it with truth, and not just with Richard’s ideas. We trust in your guidance, and your protection, and your love. We pray in all of the holy names of God, Amen.

Brie Stoner: Amen.

Paul Swanson: Amen. Thank you, Richard.

Brie Stoner: Thank you, Richard.

Paul Swanson: From prayers of blessing and protection to talking about “The World, the Flesh, and the Devil.”

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: Richard, you write in your new monograph, *What Do We Do With Evil* that Christians seem to have lost their interest in sin—

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: --not necessarily in practice, but in talking about it, trying to wrestle with it. How do you define sin so we can get kind of a baseline of what we’re talking about here. I’d love to hear how you think Christians lost interest in talking about sin.

Richard Rohr: There is a number of ways I could try to answer that. I’m sure none of them will be adequate. But for me, the biggest one is we didn’t make the link between sin and evil clear. We call things sin that were largely cultural, parent-taught, church-taught, which in many cases, were, or would at least lead to evil. But by trivializing the notion of sin, people, unfortunately, threw out the whole idea, and now we have a culture that is very much bound up in sin. I don’t know what else to say. Our capacity for deceit, for greed, for pride, for lust, for allusion [or illusion?], is overwhelming right now.

So, I want to say that right at the beginning, so people don’t think, “Oh, he’s one of those liberals, throwing out the notion of sin.” I’m not, but I think we would do better to clarify the notion of evil. Do I say that at the beginning of the book? I hope so.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Okay. And then, you can reinsert the notion of sin. But sin is more a prohibition not to do evil, you understand? But the listing of so many common

Richard Rohr: sins—in fact, the ones people took most seriously—we always use the not eating meat on Friday. It’s easy to pick on us Catholics, but every denomination had such things. You Baptists had not drinking, and—

Brie Stoner: Or dancing.

Richard Rohr: --or dance.

Brie Stoner: Or wearing skirts.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, yeah.

Brie Stoner: I mean, the list goes on.

Richard Rohr: They really got evil confused. All those things admittedly could lead to lust, could lead to greed, but you dealt with the symptom instead of the cause, and you call that sin. And it seems to me, people just lost interest. In fact, the only ones who have retained interest are people who tend to be—I’m going to say it: the blue level, at the arch-conservative level—they throw it around so easily, naming everybody else a sinner. [NOTE: Fr. Richard is

referring to the stages of human consciousness as defined in spiral dynamics.] That is the secondary reason, you know?

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: “That’s a sin. That’s a sin.” And it was always things other people were doing, never what they were doing. So, the whole thing fell apart in our lifetime, really. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It reminds me of that joke, I’m sure it’s been told about every denomination, about why a certain group—we’ll pick out my own tradition, The Covenant—didn’t teach about sex was because it might lead to dancing.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: And it’s just the foolishness of the things that we prioritize, and the—

Brie Stoner: I remember my parents had to keep it a secret that I was in ballet, that level of dancing.

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Brie Stoner: They had to keep it a secret that I was in ballet from the mission lest they think, you know, they’re the devil.

Richard Rohr: Ballet.

Paul Swanson: Beware of Baryshnikov.

Richard Rohr: It’s trivialized evil and allowed it to take over. The politics of America right now reveals that. Every time I turn on CNN, or any channel, they bring up the word “Evangelical Christians” being the primary supporters of this government.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: And I just cringe. It’s like, are we really, not that I’m an Evangelical Christian, but it’s that obvious to secular America, which is largely the media, it is largely secular, that this ain’t Jesus, but it’s something other than Jesus. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Well, Richard, diving into this topic of sin, I have to admit I am so deeply fatigued at the notion of a fallen world.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: And I’ve said this to you before, that somehow our dear first hungry lady of curiosity and unfortunate timing ushered sin into the world by eating a piece of fruit.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: And yet, you make a very helpful distinction in your monograph about what you mean by “the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.” And I’d like to zoom in on the world a little bit, if you could help us unpack how can we understand that within the framework of evil without condemning creation to somehow be broken and fallen?

Richard Rohr: Let me legitimate those words, first of all. They’re clearly in one paragraph in Ephesians. I’m opening to that right now. Thank God Paul can edit this, right? Yes. Or no? Okay. I should’ve had it ready.

Paul Swanson: No problem.

Richard Rohr: But I don’t want them to think that this is, again, just my idea. The clearest place is Ephesians 2: “You were dead,” so, he’s trying to define a state of deadness.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: And he gives three bases for this deadness: “through the crimes and the sins in which you used to live when you were following the way of the world,” there’s the first level, “obeying the ruler who governs the air,” that’s the third level, what we’re going to call the devil. “We all were among you living sensual lives ruled entirely by our own physical desires, and our own ideas,” the flesh. Ephesians 2: 1-3, although he’s making them overlap very much. Now, the typical person, myself included, is going to read that rather quickly, and say, “Oh, there’s the usual religious jargon that say nothing.”

I am convinced, and that’s what I try to present in this new little booklet, that Paul had, in fact, a very sophisticated notion of evil, but in his circular way of teaching, like you see in this paragraph, most people didn’t get it clearly. It was clarified for me somewhere in the late ‘60s, probably in ‘66, my first year of moral theology, when my wonderful professor, Father Nicholas, he said, “In classic and traditional moral theology, there were three sources of evil: the world, the flesh, and the devil.” And then he’d stop for a moment, and say very strongly, because this was repeated throughout the four-year course, “And in that order.”

Now, we didn’t know what that meant yet, because in 1966, we had no notion of-- Well, it was breaking free in the culture—structural sin, institutional evil, that’s what created the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement. As America began to discover, that were a lot of nice people, but we’re all enthralled with a system that disobeys all of the capital sins with impunity.

So, later, as I began to teach it, even back in my Cincinnati days, to the community, I substituted the word the “system” for the “world,” because some people still, when you say the world, they think you mean creation—

Brie Stoner: Exactly.

Richard Rohr: --or nature—

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: --or the planet. And, of course, that's not what we mean at all, quite the contrary. But a lot of people rightly thought that, "the world." "The world is passing away." And so, we don't have to take care of it. We don't have to protect it." So, I prefer to use the word the "system," but I begin with these classic terms. So, every institution, and I think we could all prove this if we were in a good sociology course, organizes itself for its own self-perpetuation, self-gratification, self-adulation. It creates itself to survive—

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: To look good, to earn money, to have a certain validity. And that's not bad, it really isn't. I don't think there's any other way to do it. We in the religious orders who claim to be a higher level of consciousness, we all have insurance. We get involved against Francis' orders with "filthy lucre," but first you have to name it "filthy lucre"—

Paul Swanson: Uh huh.

Richard Rohr: And then say, "Okay, it isn't entirely filthy." Yeah.

Brie Stoner: I'd like to start using that phrase just because "filthy lucre" sounds so awesome. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: I guess that isn't so common anymore.

Brie Stoner: No, not really.

Paul Swanson: No. No.

Richard Rohr: "The whole of America worships filthy lucre." [laughter] So, it was only in the '80s then that a later pope—and I'm not a huge fan of Pope John Paul II for other reasons, but he did several things very well, and one was being raised under communism—he was able to critique communism, which we would expect from popes, but he equally critiqued capitalism. And with that, in his encyclical letters, he pointed out how both were idolatrous systems, and he introduced to Catholic thinking—well, the right hasn't accepted that yet. And these are the very people who love John Paul so much, but they don't read what he really wrote—two words: "structural sin," and "institutional evil."

And now, I'm already bridging into "the flesh," but let me say it this way: Before an individual feels free to commit any of the capital sins with impunity, it has to be affirmed at least partially good collectively. You don't want to feel too much shame about it, you see. Now, this is what previous cultures, probably what we were raised in, they succeeded in totally shaming the personal level of greed, or lust, or whatever it might be, not realizing we'd already said yes to murder, let's say, at the war level—

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: --at the capital punishment level. It came as a complete surprise when the popes, now three in a row, have all come out against capital punishment. "Well, we never heard that before," the typical Catholic says, which shows we're trying to get a little more consistent. But if

we don't nip it in the bud at the world level and recognize that evil is already congealing, that evil is already making itself attractive, and good, and necessary—I emphasize the word necessary—we can't live without it. We have to have wars, we have to have capital punishment. If you live at a retributive, superficial level, I admit that probably seems to be true.

But now, as we're creating a more consistent ethic of life, we're learning to recognize the first level. But I want to say that's largely a product of the last forty, fifty years. And most people still haven't heard of it. Before that time, all of our emphasis was put on the second level, and I mean all. So, I'll stop at that.

Richard Rohr: So, we get the three levels clear, guessing you're going to ask me about the second. Are you?

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Maybe you're not.

Brie Stoner: No. I think one of the tension points with making sense out of the different levels of evil, the way your describing it—the personal and systemic—is the tension point between understanding that and this concept of the Christ-soaked world. There's a real—

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: --there's a real dissonance with that.

Richard Rohr: Very good. You're being intellectually honest. Here I say it's a Christ-soaked world, and—

Brie Stoner: And yet, we have all these systems.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: And it's good, right?

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Like "Creation is good. It is good. It is very good."

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: We're made in the image, yet we don't reflect the likeness.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: We impose these systems that perpetuate and excuse certain evil to exist.

Richard Rohr: This has always been what a lot of unbelievers, non-Christians, former Christians, have hated us for, because we appear to be making contrary statements. The very people who emphasize, or should emphasize, the goodness of reality, the goodness of creation, have really put more of their emphasis upon the sinfulness of creation.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: I hate to be bias, but that largely emerged after The Reformation, not that we didn't have it in Catholicism. But Catholicism, basically for those who studied it,

Richard Rohr: had a positive psychology, and a positive anthropology. We were the typical—I guess you're too young to remember a salesman at the door selling vacuum cleaners. And they'd come in and—

Brie Stoner: Wait, was that before Amazon, or just—”

Richard Rohr: They literally, the worst kind, would come in your room and as soon as you opened the door, pour dust on your floor.

Brie Stoner: Oh, come on.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes.

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Richard Rohr: Oh, my mother was so upset.

Paul Swanson: I bet.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. “Well, I'm here to clean it up. I can do it, and show you how my Kirby—

Brie Stoner: So bizarre.

Richard Rohr: --whatever the brand was-

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: --can clean it up.” Why of all contraptions, vacuum cleaners were sold door to door? I don't know. But that's what a lot of preachers became—spiritual vacuum cleaners.

Brie Stoner: Oh, that's good.

Richard Rohr: Or sin managers.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: We had to convince the crowd, especially when preaching became the primary sacrament, because it really was for the last five hundred years, you had to be a good preacher or you couldn't be a pastor, I wouldn't think. You came in, and put dirt on the lady's hallway floor. You had to remind humans of their sinfulness, wrongness, and then say, “You know what? I have the answer for it. It's Jesus.” And it worked for that level of consciousness.

Paul Swanson: Uh huh.



Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: “Jesus came to save you from your sin,” which is still the billboard in the deep south of the United States. So, I hope I’m answering your question that—

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --because we came to emphasize evil almost as much, if not more than, “It is good. It is good. It is good. It is good. It is very good,” now we’re having a hole to dig out of.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Because people don’t see the evidence that we proclaimed original goodness, “original blessing,” as Matthew Fox called it, so now we have a lot of makeup work to do.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. Well, this leads so well into my next question because it’s addressing this tension point. You’ve said earlier, and I can’t stop thinking about that phrase, “to bear serenely,” or “to serenely bear.”

Richard Rohr: Oh, Thérésè.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. That there’s something about learning to bear our own inconsistencies, and our own combination of factors as the whole picture being this is what it means to be human.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: It’s so difficult for us to do that. It seems like a lot of this issue about defining evil and understanding where and who, and the causality, it’s like we’re still trying to get out of being human somehow.

Richard Rohr: That’s what it became.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Brie Stoner: And in particular, this word “fleshy,” right, the flesh—

Richard Rohr: Flesh.

Brie Stoner: Fleshy has actually become a term I’m trying to use as an adjective, I’m trying to start a contemplative trend here to say if something’s really cool—

Richard Rohr: “Fleshy” contemplation.

Brie Stoner: --it’s just “fleshy.” It’s just “fleshy.” If something’s really good, “Oh, that’s real fleshy.”

Richard Rohr: You’re redeeming Paul.

Paul Swanson: That explains why you keep calling me fleshy.

Brie Stoner: Right. Oh, right. No, that might be for other reasons, Paul. But how did Paul's use of that term throw us off a bit into a panic about bodily-ness and sexuality, when in fact, he actually meant something else?

Richard Rohr: Yes, and you know I love Paul, he's a hero to me, but we'd have to pretty much blame, if we've got to blame somebody, for the mistranslation, misunderstanding of the word "flesh," we'd have to trace a direct line back to Paul, because he chooses that word, *sarx* in Greek, in contradistinction to spirit and at great length. In Romans, and in Galatians, especially, he loves to teach by dialectic, putting things in opposition, usually reconciling them if you stay with him.

I love to teach that way myself. The community back in Cincinnati, when I used to give even Sunday morning homilies, I'd give them little handouts. They'd say, "Okay, here comes one of his two-columned hand-outs." I'd always have two columns. And compare the two, and that's why "this one's bad, and this one's good," and then you reconcile it. In general, Paul did reconcile his dualisms—Jews and Greeks being one example; male and female—he could have gone further with that—

Brie Stoner: Just a little.

Richard Rohr: Just a little bit, yeah.

Brie Stoner: [inaudible 00:24:10].

Richard Rohr: --in Galatians. But the one he never even tried to reconcile is flesh and spirit.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: And so, we got stuck with it. So, flesh almost became a synonym for sin. In fact, it did.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: I have an Evangelical friend here, Eli, and when he first met me, he was always using the word, "That's of the flesh, that's of the flesh." He was raised Evangelical. I said, "Let me--" So, I bored him with this whole history, and now

Richard Rohr: he never uses that word anymore. But in his Mexican Evangelical beginnings, that's "of the flesh."

So, the better word, which I want to offer at the beginning, that comes as close as I know how to say today what he meant then is our psychological word "ego"—egocentricity, narcissism, vanity, pride. Those words all are overlapping in many ways. But, the self-sufficient self, which is cut off from communion, connection, compassion—so next time you read Romans, next time you read Galatians—every time you read "flesh," just mark it out and put in "ego.

and you'll come much closer to the truth of what I believe he was really trying to say.

Now, you haven't asked me to define flesh yet, have you, positively?

Brie Stoner: No, go for it, though.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, that'd be great.

Richard Rohr: Okay. I'll move into it. So, what do we have? Ego, first of all, applies to the individual, and that's exactly right, that flesh is individual failure, nastiness, selfishness, blindness, individual sin. Let's use that word. But it's very much the individual, not the corporate. Now, the reason we sin so readily is because it was already agreed upon collectively as not so bad.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: In our country, we call it capitalism. To save money, to hoard money, to desire money is the whole name of the game in America, and people are shocked when you say that. Yet, it's obvious. Little kids are already, you see them on TV, relishing getting rich. They'll just say it up front. So, any attempt to talk about the capital sin of gluttony, you're wasting your time. Gluttony is good. What was the movie that's—

Paul Swanson: Wall Street.

Richard Rohr: Wall Street. Yeah, yeah. "Greed is good."

Paul Swanson: "Greed is good." Yeah.

Richard Rohr: That's the way they said it, "Greed is good." Greed and gluttony, we've lost that battle, because it has first of all been legitimated. So, what we're building here now is what Dom Hélder Câmara, the holy Archbishop from Brazil who was here at Holy Family Church, believe it or not—

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Richard Rohr: --and addressed the CAC in the early years, yeah, and a truly holy man, and he taught the spiral of violence. And once you hear his teaching, or anybody's teaching, on the spiral of violence, you'll see they almost perfectly coincide and overlap. He describes violence begins by cultural agreement that Jim Crow laws are okay. Let's try that.

And in the law, in fact, the written law says, right now immigration, people are saying, "It's the law." Well, you'd think Christians would come right back and say, "But the law of God overrides human laws."

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: They never say that.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Because they really believe, because it's an American law, I'm bound by it. I'm not. That is

new thinking to most Christians.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: The first centuries, they would've taken that for granted.

Brie Stoner: Even, though, when you think about how many times Jesus said such things.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Like, you've heard it said, or "The law says this, but I say"—

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes, very good.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Another word for flesh, by the way, that the Gospels use is "mammon." Mammona was a pagan god of greed, and gluttony, and money. And Jesus himself seems to have used it.

Anyway, so, what we've done now for centuries is put all of our guns on the second level, telling people not to be of the flesh, not to be lustful, not to be selfish, not to be greedy, not to murder people. And I think we can say safely we've had little success.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Look at Europe and look at us, the supposedly Christian countries. We're the most materialistic, the most violent.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: I don't know. I don't have to prove that they're the most, but we're as bad as anybody else, for sure. So, our moral theology, we found ourselves spitting into the wind.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Just preaching moralistic sermons that could not be received. And, in fact, if—this is very apropos to what we said before—if you move to the first level of the world, the people will come in the sacristy after Mass, "Father, you're getting a little political."

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: Uh huh.

Richard Rohr: "You're getting a little ..." Because they never heard that before. You can't even blame them. We're used to being shamed: "Come on, shame us. Tell us we're terrible." They almost like it.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: I think that's true of Baptists. They want to be told how sinful they are so they can throw themselves at the feet of Jesus.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Richard Rohr: And that's dear, I guess, but in the long run, it doesn't work. Go ahead, please.

Paul Swanson: And that perpetuates just the cognitive dissonance that Christians seem to exemplify in a lot of ways, where there is the separation of what it means to be on this Christian path, and then how one goes about living the rest of their life, because culture—

Brie Stoner: Right.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Paul Swanson: --is devouring spirituality in that way, where—

Richard Rohr: Culture is winning, yep.

Paul Swanson: I'd rather pay my dues in culture and climb this ladder of ascension than to follow this path of Jesus, and goes—

Brie Stoner: It might cost me something.

Paul Swanson: It might cost me something. And this goes back to the values piece, too, right?

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: When those values aren't ingrained and embodied in a spiritual community, and in an individual, of course the world is going to win out in that way because that is the air we breathe in the day to day.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It speaks to me, too, so much of just the-- With Paul, and your style of teaching, too, where you set up these polarities, and then reconcile them, I feel like most of religion is just setting up the polarities—

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Paul Swanson: --and never reconciling—

Richard Rohr: Never reconciles them.

Paul Swanson: And just living in that constant cognitive dissonance.

Richard Rohr: Uh huh, very good.

Paul Swanson: It's exhausting.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: So, the hell with religion, in a way.

Richard Rohr: Well put. Well put. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It's just getting in the way of me—

Richard Rohr: It's just—

Paul Swanson: --following the greedy path.

Richard Rohr: --creating my mind to be schizophrenic of what really is evil, what really is good. I don't know; so, "I give up on the whole thing."

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: I can't live this tortured existence, so I stop. It was like teenage boys when I was a teenager, they'd say, "How can you not have a sexual thought?" And we were told you go to hell for all eternity if you have one.

Brie Stoner: I mean—

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: Whoops.

Richard Rohr: So, as soon as they could get away from high school, Catholic high school, they left the Church.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Impossible situation.

Richard Rohr: Impossible.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. And it's also reminding me of your teaching of that trilateral hermeneutic, where it's when you only focus on one of the three, you're zooming in on one thing, and then it kind of justifies a certain particular perspective because it's not in tension with the other two. And similarly, with this, the over-emphasis at this level of the flesh allows you to nitpick at things at this level without even admitting or noticing the waters we swim in culturally—

Richard Rohr: Yeah, the waters we swim in.

Brie Stoner: --that are justified. "So, let me just go to church, and hear about how Jesus cares so much about the poor, and then make sure I go hit up that sale at Macy's." And this, maybe, is why we've justified and perpetuated a nice Christianity.

Richard Rohr: Nice.

Brie Stoner: It's nice. It's like, "Let me just have my nice life, and I want to go to my nice church, and I don't want my nice thoughts to be threatening, or to be threatened." And then it's this lukewarm nothingness.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Niceness instead of truth, or niceness instead of justice. And now, it's so commonly accepted that people really resist when you move them out of that, or say the Gospel is more than that. Good.

Paul Swanson: And I know we've touched on the devil in season two, but I think it would be helpful in this context, also—

Richard Rohr: Oh, did we say this already?

Paul Swanson: Well, not this. But just we got a lot of questions from listeners about the devil, and how does that play into these conversations of the Universal Christ? But in this context of the world, the flesh, and the devil, Richard, would you be able to unpack how—especially since they're all so interconnected in the way you're layering it with what Dom Hélder—

Richard Rohr: Hélder.

Paul Swanson: --was saying. Can you speak to the devil a little bit?

Richard Rohr: Yes. Now, this'll take longer because it's a rather total re-imagining while not throwing out the concept is very real, and you would be naïve to throw out the very notion of evil spirits. Let's first of all analyze the word "spirit." It usually means something invisible—but it still has power, an invisible power—and in this case, a negative, invisible power. When I asked Father [Cerin 00:35:21] do I have to believe in the devil? He said, "Well, you don't have to believe in a guy with a red pitchfork, but you better recognize that all the major religions of the world, historically, had some notion of the devil that was so real it was even personified and visualized in statues, especially in the Orient." There were devils at every door or gargoyles in medieval cathedrals. You had to give evil a face or—and here's the assumption, which Jung very much agrees with—if you don't give it a face, you don't know how to talk to it, relate to it, take it seriously, huh? And Jung very much says that's true. Until you personify something, you don't take it as a power. It's just an idea.

So, I can see why we did that, and all the other world religions did it. But it became, over time, a caricature of the guy with the tail, and the pitchfork, and he was usually red for some reason, I don't know why.

Brie Stoner: Because red is the color of sin, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Sin. That's right.

Brie Stoner: The blood.

Richard Rohr: The woman with the—

Brie Stoner: [inaudible 00:36:45].

Richard Rohr: --adultery written on her chest.

Brie Stoner: That's right.

Richard Rohr: The "A."

Brie Stoner: The big “A.”

Richard Rohr: The Scarlet Letter, yeah. So, halfway into that definition, they were very right. It’s an invisible, negative force. Now, I’m going to transfer that to modern

Richard Rohr: language because Paul doesn’t have modern language, he has pre-modern language. And I want you to know, as well, a phrase I use from Ephesians, he talks about “obeying the ruler who governs the air. The spirit who is at work in the rebellious.” All right?

So, the easiest way to imagine that is a little spirit flying around. And if someone proves there are such things, I’m not going to be upset, it’s okay, but it doesn’t help you address the issue if you think it’s that. Because you too easily project that spirit onto people who are not like you.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Other races, other religions, they have devils. My wife has a devil. That doesn’t need much proving. Unstable people either over-identify with it, and that’s probably what called forth this whole tradition of exorcism, or project it onto the tribe on the other side of the river. They all have demons.

Here are the words I have learned to use in *The Living School*: Anything that is a complex constellation of energies that is so in charge, so universally recognized that it’s too big to fail, and you can’t capture it. You can’t localize it. This ability to localize it gave us some comfort, do you understand?

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: We could exorcise that. But, precisely, “the spirit in the air” can’t be localized. It’s all around us, like you spoke of the “air.” You used that very word. It’s the air we breathe, it’s the water we drink, it’s the way the system works. And so, if the first level, the world, was denied and disguised evil—let’s just use those two words; you deny it and disguise it—everybody acts out of it at the flesh level largely without much guilt, what will happen over time, if it is not critiqued, is it will not just be denied and disguised, it will become romanticized, and sanctified, and sacralized as very good.

Now, people are saying, “What is he talking about?” I want you to just think of the glorification of war in almost every culture in the world. Just look at the statues in the city squares of the world—always a soldier. And it’s all identified with badges, and parades, and salutes, and honor. Words like that, “sacred honor,” and beautiful cemeteries, and Fourth of July parades in our country, and every other country.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: So, killing has become, and must become, so romanticized when you do it for your country that it’s no longer evil.



Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: So, when this was first introduced in our country, was by a Republican president in the late 1950s, the day after he left office and was no longer a general. That someone who was both a president and a general, the day after would give a speech—look it up—would coin the phrase the “military industrial complex.” Eisenhower said it. He said, “You better watch it. It’s going to take over America.” I can’t believe a Republican would say that, but Republicanism was very different then.

And this is what has happened. This “spirit in the air,” I mean, our amount of instruments of killing, and boats, is just unbelievable. And it covers the earth, it covers the earth. And it is above question. It’s usually not even debated in the Congress. That’s how sanctified it is. Everything else can get debated—education, how much pay a teacher gets, “Well, we don’t think they deserve that.” But if you’re a retiring general or admiral, you’re set for the rest of your life.

So, that’s the clearest example, but let me give several others. The military industrial complex is too big to fail, above question, above critique, if you like that. Now, this is what made me create the three boxes of order/disorder. When you have no introduction of disorder, of recognizing the problems with these systems, you’re not allowed to say it, or you’ll be voted out of office. So, I’m going to make an absolute statement that’s going to upset some people, but anything that is un-critique-able will soon be demonic. I’m going to say that. Give it a few years. And where’s the first demon? In Mark’s Gospel in the synagogue.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Religion un-critiqued will soon become demonic: pedophilia crisis, huh?

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: The penal system. You’ve heard me say many times how I was a jail chaplain here in Albuquerque for fourteen years. And what become so apparent to me is that most, not all, most of the wardens and guards wanted to punish these people, not improve them or help them. The underlying “spirit in the air” was punishment. And not just punishment, but humiliation. Why do you want to be a prison guard on the first level? You like the power differential. When you walk up and down and you’ve got all the power, and that poor slob over there has no power, what kind of person loves that? And I’m not saying it’s true in all cases but very often.

Richard Rohr: The banking system. The World Bank does not care about the poor, does not care that much of the world is starving. The healthcare system. And all I would ask people to do is be honest. Most of them—now, let me hesitate a little bit, but I’m still going to say it in its bold form—are demonic. When I say that, I’m not saying that every individual guard is demonic, or every individual soldier, many of whom are more moral than I am, but we’re so used to imputing all sin and guilt to the individual. The only student I’m aware of who angrily left The Living School was I was halfway into this talk, and I mentioned the banking system, yeah, and her husband was a banker. If she’d stayed a little longer, I’m not saying every individual banker.

Brie Stoner: Right.

Richard Rohr: Some of them live quite ordinary, generous, good lives.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: But I'm saying the banking system, it's a system that, once you buy into it, you're trapped, anything that sucks you into its collective mood and justifies you being dishonest. Look at our political system. It's so corrupt now.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: You just wonder how will we ever get out of this? That it's acceptable to lie. We've normalized deceit, we've normalized allusion [or illusion?]. So, you get a feeling for it. It's the hardest one to describe, but it's in charge. If you think I'm being negative, what does Jesus say? "Satan is the prince of this world." The devil is in charge. Don't picture the red demon again, but the "spirits in the air." Now, his other words for that were "powers, principalities, thrones, and dominations." Those are pre-modern words for "institutions and corporations."

Brie Stoner: Right.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Now, don't make me anti-institutional. I'm not, but I am. [laughter]

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Can you allow me to say both? You can't, if you're a dualistic thinker, "You're a crazy, anti-institutional Liberal." I'm really not, but things without critique all become demonic.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: And so, you have to be able to love and critique, just as I do the Catholic Church, and the United States, and I hope, myself.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: "Richard's good, but Richard's not that good." [laughter] We all have to be able to say that.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: But that's exactly what I was going to say is this is helpful as a litmus test to say, "What am I unwilling to critique?" Is there anything—

Richard Rohr: That's right, yeah.

Brie Stoner: --in my—

Richard Rohr: It really is. It's so simple.

Brie Stoner: And then to notice when I-- I'm thinking of having some students who've gotten really riled up about us talking about White privilege. It's like, "Okay, what's going on there?" But I think the other thing I was thinking about is the ways in which capitalism or consumerism has created a world where there's an I/it relationship.

Richard Rohr: That's right, with everything.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: And I think I was trying to find a trail of, "Well, where would you put this increased consumer orientation even in our sexuality?" I was trying to—

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Brie Stoner: --trace, like, "Okay, how did this happen?" And I felt like, as I pull on that thread, you're right. It's not at the flesh level. It's at the big corporate level of consume, use, for your own benefit, discard. And when you get to that place where you are treating beings as things that can be used for your own pleasure, and then discarded, that's in this—

Richard Rohr: You both die.

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Richard Rohr: You both die.

Brie Stoner: And that's in our system so deeply that we don't even notice it. We glorify it.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. And part of what this brings to my mind, too, is as a kid, I remember asking about fossil fuels, if we knew this was going to hurt the ozone layer, why were we so dependent on them?

Richard Rohr: And you could already see that with a boy's clarity.

Paul Swanson: And I remember being told, "Well, it's a necessary evil."

Brie Stoner: Oh.

Paul Swanson: Which I think people will say, too, with advertising and sexualizing of bodies as a way to sell something—

Brie Stoner: Yep.

Paul Swanson: --and not seeing what they're perpetuating in similar things. So, Richard, how do you respond when someone says, from a Universal Christ perspective, when someone says, "Well, Richard, unchecked capitalism, or the military industrial complex is just a necessary evil."

Richard Rohr: I would say, "You're half right, and grant me that I really mean that."

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: That's what we mean by, we used to use the term, "living in a fallen world." There is no pedestal of purity.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: That's why I call evil in this same, new book "the tragic sense of life." None of us are pure, or as Paul says, "All have sinned." But you're half wrong. And you almost have to say those two statements together. And until you know you're half wrong, you do not gain the ability to critique that system. Like the common phrase, "Well, you criticize America." Well, the President just said it, if you-- Why not leave?" Talk about dualistic thinking. Anything you criticize, you have to leave?

Paul Swanson: Right.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: See, we've got a very free worldview. We can stay in it imperfect, and we don't need to leave.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: But we will offer it our fair critique. The world does not know how to do that. You have to be enthralled with it, or leave it. I think we have a far more advanced position whereby we can, and I can, love America, but I do not worship America. I see America's faults, which actually allows me to love it better in the true meaning of love." I love that which is lovable—

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: --but I don't love that which is unlovable." That's not love anymore when you say you love things that are causing pain to Black people, Brown people, immigrant people, you've prostituted your ethics, your morality. And that's part of what we do. It isn't all that we do.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Oh, it's hard to get people to think that way. You see why we emphasize in *The Living School* so much non-dual thinking. I don't think in the first years I applied that enough to evil. To recognize evil but to not need to overreact and throw out the baby with the bathwater. That's forgiveness: "I forgive reality for being partial. I forgive myself for not being totally perfect and totally pure," which is no goal that we should even set for ourselves, but we have to recognize good and evil to know how to even do that.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: It's subtle. I know it's subtle. And I want to ask God when I get there, whatever "there" is, why He left us with such a dilemma.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, it seems like this is a thread that's running through our conversations in this season, is that non-dual thread that can accept the complexity of both.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: And you have this line that says what sin is, "It's, first of all, an impossible situation of human life"—

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Brie Stoner: --"perhaps summed up in the phrase, 'You can't win.'" And then you also say things like, "The only available perfection we have is our honest acceptance of our imperfection." These are non-dual teachings.

Richard Rohr: Concepts.

Brie Stoner: Because as we look at evil, and as we see it as a structurally systemic part of our world, the response that we may have is, "Well, how do we combat it?" Or, "How do we try to move it one step forward?" And suddenly I'm thinking of the imagery that Jesus uses of "yeast and leaven."

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: That, to me—

Richard Rohr: That's good.

Brie Stoner: --it's within the other. The yeast is within the dough.

Richard Rohr: That's right. Yes.

Brie Stoner: That we can act as yeast within the dough. It doesn't deny the dough, though.

Richard Rohr: Doesn't deny it.

Brie Stoner: We're still actively in a world that has these systems at play, and yet, the point is that we are active within it, not without. Does that make sense? Am I making sense?

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It totally makes sense. And I think it harkens back to the other parts of our conversation about living in the era of absurdity. That is almost the dough; the dough is so absurd. How to be a yeast that makes sense that will help leaven it to this fullness of a loaf of bread? I recognize that metaphor does not work that well.

Brie Stoner: No, I like it.

Richard Rohr: It's okay. it's okay.

Brie Stoner: I like it. I'm going with it.

Brie Stoner: Jesus thought it was good enough, so let's do it. But within that, I think that idea of yeast in bread.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Brie Stoner: You know, one of the images that is so profound and a part of our tradition is this idea of a babe in a manger in the midst of violence, and in the midst of empire, and in the midst of all of these systems of evil very much at play in the context of where Jesus was born. How does that babe in a manger, how can

Brie Stoner: that help us orient to, and yet-- Okay, so, these things are at play, and yet, here is this beautiful image of the vulnerable Christ still being born—

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: --still manifesting—the light in the darkness; this little candle. There are so many images like that that we can perhaps turn to, to animate our own awareness of evil, and our own participation in moving beyond it, or trying to bring something else into the world.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Yeah. That's actually courageous to say that because the first instinct of a rational male, "Oh, God, a sentimental thing about motherhood now." But if God wants to give us an image of vulnerability that most human beings can relate to, a little naked baby in a stable, and not even born where human beings live, but where animals live, subject to the elements—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Well, and born in a time when there was so much political unrest—

Richard Rohr: Uh huh.

Brie Stoner: --that shortly thereafter, firstborns were murdered.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Can you think of a more violent image than—

Richard Rohr: You really can't, yeah.

Brie Stoner: --firstborns being killed?

Richard Rohr: That God has come into the world in a vulnerable, naked form, and this is the gospel he gives us. Because what we've just talked about is you have to be free to be some degree naked from any kind of status, self-image, "I'm above sin. I am not unworthy." "No, you're even unworthy." You can't place yourself among the righteous. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And that became one of the chapters in *The Universal Christ* book, that we have to see sin as a collective. And if we addressed sin as a collective notion that the burden of sin is something I agree to carry along with you—in carrying mine, I carry yours—I don't try to prove that I'm above it. Isn't that very notion what's prostituted most

religion—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --trying to prove I'm holier than thou? "No, I'm a sinner just like you." That was the first public statement of Pope Francis: "Who are you?" They held up the microphone to him, and he said, "I am a sinner." Wow. That's good. That's good. The racing, competing game is over.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: It's far more fundamental than we realize—"to bear the weight of glory and the burden of sin," which are both collective notions, makes you emphasize holding hands instead of flying above.

Paul Swanson: It reminds me of the story of when Jesus's disciples were clobbering over each other who was going to be sitting next to Jesus, who's going to be the greatest, and what does Jesus do but turns to the child.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Vulnerable again. Yes.

Paul Swanson: And he enters the world in such a way, and then that's also what he uplifts as the path, right?

Brie Stoner: Well, as we wrap up this conversation, Richard, where do you feel like we need to face the world, the flesh, and the devil critique, even within our Christian contemplative movement? Where do we need to be open to seeing some of our own shadow?

Richard Rohr: You're bringing it home, because this is what we have to watch for. The CAC these days has been so blessed by a wonderful staff, wonderful, charming abode properties here in the South Valley, of the Mexican-American barrio of Albuquerque, a staff of almost fifty. I don't know of any peace and justice center that even comes close to what we have. So, this question that you just asked, we have to keep asking, because when do we become a complex?

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: When do we become so worshipful? We're going to talk this afternoon to some of the members of the board and staff about what does simplicity of life mean for the board and the staff? We can't just keep teaching these things while we ourselves are becoming more and more comfortable, or the whole thing isn't going to sustain itself.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: If there isn't at least a core of staff who are into some form of downward mobility; the nakedness that we see in the baby in the manger. If we're all really into upward mobility while two-thirds of the world is starving, why should

Richard Rohr: anybody take us seriously? And here we are in the richest country in the world, comfortable on so many levels.

So, it's just very easy for us to buy into the system here. It really is, and it's never easy to say. I know this over my thirty-two years here, because what's the usual response, even from staff, even from good staff, "You're making me feel guilty," because that's the only level they're used to evil being addressed on, evil.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Right.

Richard Rohr: I'm talking about the world, how much are we buying into the world?

Brie Stoner: That's it.

Richard Rohr: I'm talking about the devil, how much-- But that very inability for the board and staff to allow themselves to be critiqued means we're part of the problem—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --insofar as that's true. I'm not saying it's overwhelmingly true.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: But always when you first do it, with a new staff member, or a new board member, you can tell they're shocked, if not disappointed, if not angry: "We're not used to this. We thought we were joining a place where—" In fact, the phrase of my first popular book, *Everything Belongs*, is now being misused, in my opinion.

Brie Stoner: Oh, no.

Paul Swanson: Huh.

Brie Stoner: Used against you as a—

Richard Rohr: Yeah. "Well, Richard, everything belongs." [laughter] You see how the ego will move—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Everything, even my selfishness, belongs.

Brie Stoner: Geez.

Richard Rohr: Even my arrogance belongs. Oh.

Paul Swanson: But it's funny how, even as you talk about this, it's exactly what we've been naming as the gift in the thread that you even have your entire career of you're trying to reconcile these polarities of, "Yes, this is true. We live in these waters of greed and arrogance but we cannot become that." And so, we have to live within that. And what does it mean for us to be that reconciling principle by clearly seeing what's going on and, also, clearly trying to follow the intention of being an alternative way of being in the world?



Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: Beautiful. Without becoming judgmental—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --arrogant, dismissive. That's what I think Jesus means by it's a narrow road.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: It's really narrow to know how to do both.

Brie Stoner: Well, and Richard, you've lived the example of humility, of allowing yourself to be critiqued.

Richard Rohr: It's because I know who I am, and I know who I'm not.

Brie Stoner: Right. But even that statement right there, it's such a legacy for us to live into, for all of us to live into, to live with that level of humility. Because it seems to me, that it's your humility which allows you to see, "Okay, I'm not going to forget these three levels of things that are at play around me." So, it's a real invitation for me, and I think for all of us, to live into so that we can have the eyes to see where we're becoming complicit with the world, the flesh, and the devil without even realizing it.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: So, thank you.

Paul Swanson: Yes, thank you.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: We'll try to keep you humble, too. Yeah, as a—

Richard Rohr: Keep me-- Give me my daily humiliation.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: What is it?

Paul Swanson: Yeah. [crosstalk 01:03:23].

Brie Stoner: That's good.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. That's great, Richard. I'm so glad to hear that conversation is happening.