

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 3, Episode 8
Emotional Buoyancy

Brie Stoner: [music playing] How are you feeling today, Paul?

Paul Swanson: I feel pretty good, and you?

Brie Stoner: I'm good. Yup. Any particular feelings and emotions you want to share?

Paul Swanson: Well—

Brie Stoner: Are you having a happy day? A sad day? Mad day?

Paul Swanson: Let me check in. I'm having a glad day.

Brie Stoner: A glad day! I'm so glad. Oh, my gosh. I totally just felt like a mom there. I was like, "How was your day, honey? Was it good? What'd you do?" In this episode we are exploring the topic of emotional buoyancy and how our feelings can be messengers that can be helpful for us in understanding ourselves, understanding the world around us, but oftentimes in our culture we get so stuck on them and turn them into stories that become our identities at times.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I also think about in religious circles, too, like there's sometimes just a certain spectrum of emotions that are acceptable and how—

Brie Stoner: Like being sweet and nice.

Paul Swanson: That's it. That's it.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. And sad.

Paul Swanson: How do we embrace the fullness of our emotions because we were, in fact created this way. And so, part of, I think, the beauty of this conversation was asking Richard and hearing his take on what's a right relationship to the emotions? What does it mean to have healthy detachment? What does it mean to fully feel our feelings and take them as messengers and not as an entire storyline? [music ends]

Brie Stoner: Yeah. I don't know if you feel this way, Paul, but I feel that, I just said feel, that so much of our culture has become entirely supportive of being self-referential when it comes to our feelings, to the point where it's just like how do you get

Brie Stoner: beyond that? I mean, if your feelings rule the day and your opinions rule the day, it's very difficult to find an objective ground on which we can begin to connect. I don't even know if that made sense.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. You mean like the lens with which you view reality is through your feelings.

Brie Stoner: Exactly.

Paul Swanson: So, everything is a projection of your own feeling; and, therefore, you are that centerpiece of reality.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. And so, as we explore how contemplation can help us have a right relationship to

our feelings and to orient ourselves to a selfhood that is beneath the ebb and flow of our emotions, we're also talking about how to have a stance of forgiveness for ourselves and each other and just allowing ourselves to be human, allowing the human experience to be what it is. I love that line that Richard has where that the only perfection available to us is the honest acceptance of our imperfection. I find that so helpful. Also, I thought that as parents, it was fun to discuss the ways in which our kids pull us out of our emotions and how even as we're teaching them how to deal with their emotions, [music begins playing] they're also teaching us and showing us patience and giving us opportunities to do it better next time.

Paul Swanson: I also love how our kids are mirroring back to us our own emotions. They're learning from us how to deal with their emotions, and so this also is the invitation to be grounded in our own sense of relationship to our emotional life, because it has a greater impact than just ourselves, but what we bring to our little people in our life.

Brie Stoner: That's right. Well, with that, I hope you enjoy our episode on Emotional Buoyancy.

Paul Swanson: [music ends] Well, it's good to be in this room with all of you again. This morning as we talk about emotions and the spectrum of emotions that we experience on our human journey, one thing that we've learned is that emotions can be beautiful messengers that can help us make sense of the reality of all of life, of the joy, the sorrow, when boundaries have been violated, and so on. On the other hand, a person can fall inside of an emotion or it's almost like the emotion seems to own who they are. This all goes to say, Richard, how do you understand how one should relate to their own emotional life on their human journey?

Richard Rohr: This is one of those questions where we have to say both a strong "yes" and a strong "no." First of all, "yes," because so many of us were trained, basically by family and religion, to not feel our feelings. They thought they were doing us a favor. They really did, I think, because they didn't want emotions to rule our life,

Richard Rohr: but, unfortunately, they gave a moral connotation to the feeling: "That's wrong. That's bad." Both family and religion, maybe family earned it from religion? I don't know. It doesn't matter. But it really stunted us in our capacity to appreciate and to suffer—and let me explain suffer in a moment—the meaning of reality, because emotions are, first of all, a gift from God so that we can touch upon reality in a way other than our brain.

And so, because they were so repressed, and denied, and thought to be always faulty, that's probably one of the major reasons we moved into this overly heady Christianity. So, what we're rediscovering now—I know this has the danger of swinging the pendulum to the other side—that emotions are always right, emotions are always good, emotions don't have to have any cognitive balancing of, is that a sensible response? Is that a reasonable response? Is that a comparable response to the situation? So, we have a lot of sentimentality, drama, the pumping up of emotions about nothing. Really, it became a whole sitcom called Seinfeld. [laughing]

I love, watched it, and laughed at it, but if real life is that way, that we spend hours really creating dramas because there is no inner drama, if I can put it that way, there's no inner aliveness, there's no inner contentment, and that's pretty evenly equated. You can recognize when people who have no inner life will get overly dramatic about—and you just want to

say, but you can't because it's unkind—you want to say, “Cool it. It's not that big a deal.” But here's why it is a big deal, is that it's tied to the false self where most people are living their lives.

Inside that frame of the ego, of the small self, it is a big deal. Now, the old phrase we used to use “in the light of eternity,” the Latin phrase was *sub specie aeternitatis* [Latin language 00:07:27]. And the nuns would say to us, “When you're on your deathbed, will that matter?” Now that seems silly to me, but it wasn't entirely, because it reframed the drama you're in right now, when you're on your deathbed—I know most of us can't leap forward to that—but will this really matter that she bumped you in the hallway, which is something a little fourth-grade “four” would get upset at? [Note: Fr. Richard is referring to an Enneagram type number. There are nine Enneagram types.]

Brie Stoner: What do you mean, Richard? [laughter]

Richard Rohr: I gazed toward a certain person to my right. I'm sure you didn't.

Brie Stoner: No, I did very much. But that's the funny thing is that, left unchecked, our egos take our emotions and turn them into these storylines—

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Brie Stoner: --that we just get so hooked on.

Richard Rohr: And identified with.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Once you replay the story more than once, it actually becomes your truth. If I can say so, our head of state, the lies he tells have probably been told in his brain so many times, I'm going to give him the credit, that he probably thinks it's true.

To a lesser degree with lesser influence, we all do the same thing. We tell ourselves a story through our emotions that we prefer to be true, and it's always self-referential. It's always, “How does it make me right now feel?” You want to say will you even feel that way an hour from now, or by this evening, but if you live totally in a self-referential world, your emotions tend to control your life. Now, in its worst state, it becomes mental and emotional illness. It's so self-referential that there's no contact with other people's needs, with reality. There's no capacity for empathy, what someone else might be feeling. It's frightening how true this is today.

Paul Swanson: I really appreciate how you addressed the symptom of that when the diagnosis is, it's the lack of inner life that creates the drama exteriorly.

Richard Rohr: I think so.

Paul Swanson: How we can go even further with that, you know, how we project or see the world

through that emotion, and we're almost projecting it on like a movie screen on the world around us and interpreting through just that lens. I mean, I'd never thought of it that way, there's no internal drama.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. There's nothing exciting or satisfying happening in your soul. That phrase from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "Go to your inner room and shut the door." Why would he go so far as to say, "Stop the outer noise," because really—and now we're into René Girard—the only reason you're feeling that so much is that is the current cultural drama. He calls it memetic rivalry, as you know, that we desire things that other people are desiring. That's why the cultural mood keeps changing, changing; or, basically, we feel what we know will sell—what's plausible, not what's really happening but what's plausible. Like right now, playing the victim is so plausible that everybody's doing it, and you cannot critique it.

It's an unquestionable storyline that, okay, I can't disagree with his feelings, like not truth, or logic, or reality, these aren't paramount. His private feelings are paramount. This, you could say, forgive me if now I'm being overdramatic, but this is the destruction of culture because everything is individual. There is nothing shared that's true. It's only my drama versus your drama and your ability to articulate it. So, the one with the loudest voice, the most articulate voice, wins. I saw this happen even in the 70s in the whole massive, beautiful

Richard Rohr: prayer movement. Every parish was having its prayer group, which would seem so holy and so right, but even inside of prayer groups, the person who could shout God language the loudest, or quote scripture the loudest, controlled the whole group.

That wasn't always the case. Often, there were truly holy people who you felt, you know, "God might have gotten into her brain." But more often than not, it was the most articulate person with high control needs. That's why what was a big deal in the early '70s was already massively dying by the late '70s. That's how short lived it was, because I would say, for all the gift of the baptism in the spirit and the charismatic movement, emotions controlled the prayer meeting. If you couldn't build up positive emotions, there was always someone there with a prophecy of doom.

"The spirit is not among us today, because some of you are in sin." Well, we're all in sin. It just got so stupid. It wasn't always that way. There were so many that were so God bound, bound for God I mean, but most of them seemed to be bound up in emotions.

And so, we started in '77 in San Antonio, I and Fr. George Montague started the Catholic Charismatic Bible School. It went for ten years. I went down there every summer and taught, and it was trying to give Catholics who did have this authentic Jesus experience, some kind of critical approach to Scripture, because we knew if we didn't bring the head into the heart or the heart into the head, put it either way, this was going to crash like everything else did.

Brie Stoner: This is reminding me of, again, of the ways that there's been this thread in our conversation during this season about holding things in tension with each other. I'm

thinking about in the Evangelical tradition how so much of our spirituality is equated with a certain kind of feeling-ness—feeling God, feeling connected to God. It was placed at the level of feelings, so when you weren't having that sensation or feeling—

Richard Rohr: You didn't have God.

Brie Stoner: Yeah, so you lived with this kind of a hamster-wheel panic of trying to keep up this feeling, this kind of emotional high, that would often get somewhat prodded, poked, and fanned through music and the worship music. I remember people would, just like the certain chord progressions, that would just make you really feel like you were—

Richard Rohr: Really feel.

Brie Stoner: --just like the hands come up and you're just head back. I don't want to completely dismiss what's—

Richard Rohr: No, you can't.

Brie Stoner: --what is beautiful about that, which is probably the closest we have to a mystical contemplative experience in the Evangelical—

Paul Swanson: Ecstatic.

Brie Stoner: Ecstatic, yeah. But it's just fascinating that you're saying, again, the head, the heart, and the body have to be in tension with one another.

Richard Rohr: That's right. They have to balance.

Brie Stoner: And when we allow feelings to take over and become our primary narrative, that we're not really living in tension with a true lens for what's going on. I wonder, Richard, if you could talk about how your practice, or how contemplative practice can help us maybe unhook with our addiction to seeing the world through feelings, which can be so self-referential.

Richard Rohr: I would have to say, I think it's the quickest, finally most effective way to learn how to detach, how to not identify with, even in the moment when you're talking with an angry person who's maybe angry at you, the natural thing is for you to identify with this humiliation, the name of this person just called me. It's very hard to not do that, but without some kind of practice in surrender, detachment, you'll almost always go there.

So, it doesn't have to be our form, centering prayer contemplation, which has so many different forms, but they all have to come down to saying, "That's not me." That feeling I'm having is separate from my essential "I." It's a codependent relationship on what other people think, whatever other people feel, memetic rivalry, to use that fancy word, imitative emotion that we've seen. This is why children, and I know you're so aware of this as parents. You see it already by five and six that they mimic the emotions they've seen you portray. How could they not? How could they not, which must be so scary.

Brie Stoner: It's brutal. I'm thinking of Rowan recently saying to me while I was teaching Soren how to just connect with his breath, and I was having a real parenting win moment, and Rowan just

looks at me. He goes, “Mom,” and I think I’ve told this story before, but it’s—

Richard Rohr: It’s a good one.

Brie Stoner: It’s a good one where he says, “Mom, you know what sounds you make when you’re frustrated? Huhhhhhhh.”

Richard Rohr: [laughter] That’s a perfect example.

Brie Stoner: Then he just kept doing it, and I was like, “Oh, man. Yeah, okay, so much—

Richard Rohr: It’s already passed over.

Brie Stoner: --for being Zen.”

Richard Rohr: Mimetic rivalry—he’s rivaling you and outdoing it. We can’t say that’s wrong, but what we have to do is model positive mimetic rivalry. It must be very hard to do when they know you’re irritated, and you can use that as a teachable moment, “Now, honey, you know I’m upset, because that car cut me off. I want to be upset, but let’s practice not being upset. There’s more important things than letting negative bugaboos getting into our heart and into our mind.”

So, yeah, we have to use for ourselves, first of all, but certainly for our families, those opportunities. I’ve told the story many times, oh, years ago I was in New Hampshire with a French Catholic family, and we all went to Mass in this little pretty French Catholic church, and the priest was terrible. It was a horrible sermon and horrible liturgy, at least, by my critical evaluation, which, of course, I wasn’t going to say anything. I was the outsider. I just sat there in the pew.

We sat down, and they had about five kids, and they said, “Daddy, that sucked. That was terrible. Why do we have to go to church?” And he was a very mature, spiritual man. He says, “Everybody has a right to a bad day. I didn’t like it either. It was disappointing, frankly. I might even go and talk to father about it, why it wasn’t good.” This guy probably would, but what a teachable moment. He didn’t buy in to what his wife and all his five kids were feeling, and he modeled fathering. I just sat there aghast. I’d love to see some of those kids today if they had a dad like that.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: I do think it’s those moments as parents when we can have the humility to say, and this is something that my kids say, is, “Hey, can we hit the reset button? Can we reset our ground right now? Things have gotten out of hand.” I don’t know, Paul, if you have things that you do as well in that way, that help kind of admit, “Okay-- Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I love that phrase “reset button.” I’m going to introduce that to the family, but I think for me one thing—

Brie Stoner: I use it a lot.

Paul Swanson: I would, too, and I think there’s something about when you, not just trying to model, when

you're doing it right, but when you do it wrong and to come back around and say, "Sweetie, boy, did I just blow it, and I'm so sorry that I hurt you in that way with those words. I was acting out of anger instead of from a place of love." Those moments are hard, too, because you recognize you're being that vulnerable before a four-year-old, who is just going to soak it in and just kind of big eyes, not say much, but just absorb it.

Richard Rohr: Not say much, but what did daddy just do, or mother?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: I do feel they help us mirror or they help mirror back to us, that sense of that kind of unconditional love when we do bring that forward and say, "Hey, I'm so sorry I got frustrated about that. That was just unnecessary, and I'm sorry you had to feel me get upset about the fact that I was late coming into recording the podcast today," for example. "I'm sorry I got stressed out." Then just to watch them reflect back, "Oh, it's okay mama. I have bad days too."

Paul Swanson: That's amazing.

Brie Stoner: Anyway.

Paul Swanson: That's amazing. Yeah, I think I was telling you and our producer Corey yesterday about, I got a text from my wife about our daughter who her preschool teacher told, Laura, my wife, that at preschool that day, she was talking to another four-year-old and said, "Yeah, our house is too small, but we love our neighborhood. And like, a four-year-old saying this, she bounces between being a four-year-old and a middle-aged woman, but it's because she's heard us say this.

Richard Rohr: Of course.

Paul Swanson: She's just throwing it back in her own, trying it on with her four-year-old friends who are, I'm sure could care less that our house is too small, but we really like the neighborhood.

Richard Rohr: So you know you've said that.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: And she heard you.

Paul Swanson: She heard it. We didn't know she heard it.

Richard Rohr: It must give you such satisfaction.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. As we talk about these emotions and how we connect or disconnect, I've been hanging out with Meister Eckhart a little bit through books, not through reality.

Brie Stoner: I'm so glad you clarified that, Paul.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I didn't want anyone to think ill of me, but obviously his teaching on detachment. Someone nuanced it for me in such a way that I found so helpful, that it was more

archeological rather than architectural. He wasn't trying to build more space in life but trying to uncover what's already there. That just flipped a switch for me.

Richard Rohr: Oh. A clever use of the phrase. Okay.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I'm wondering, Richard, can you speak to us about detachment, particularly in light of the vow or value of simplicity that we've been circling around this season?

Richard Rohr: It's wonderful if we can make that connection. I think if I did it at all, it's taken me a long time to do it, but that "Blessed are the poor in spirit," the first Beatitude of Jesus I think talks about my spirit not being righteous, overly self-assured, rich in its certitudes. We've touched on this already in this series, but it's worth repeating, that it's not just we apply everything to material externals. How about interior internals, poverty of thought, poverty of emotion, tamp them down, I don't have to say the clever thing.

You've heard me say in years past that I really feel sorry for little kids who are introverts or maybe, frankly, not as bright or not as quick, when the character of grade-school conversation is clever put downs, just clever put downs, one after the other. How helpless, how stupid probably, a kid who's slow must feel by the time they're out of grade school. The kids who win are the kids who are extroverted, quick, and dramatic, and, frankly, obscene, which is why we've moved toward this more and more common usage of four-letter words. That puts the person for some reason in charge. I'd love to know the logic of that, but you throw out "hell" and you've got a new control the group, and we've all done it. Not me, because I'm obedient to my mother who said never use it.

Brie Stoner: You're a saint.

Richard Rohr: When she heard me use "shit" on an early cassette, she called the up from Kansas, "Now, Dickey, I told you never to use that word." She was dead serious. Anyway, Eckhart went so far as to say—I'm sure you know this—detachment, detachment, detachment. When you first hear it, it says, "Oh, well, that's an overstatement," but do you see how it all relies on the existence of the true self? If you can peel away all the pomp and circumstance, the true self stands revealed. He had to have experienced that. It's just about detachment. Now, I don't totally agree with him, however, because I do believe it's about passion for the good and not just detachment from the bad, but his further writings show that he understood that too. Maybe that's what you mean by archeological being the detaching, architectural being the passionate building, or what?

Paul Swanson: Well, the way that it was landing for me was that when some folks talk about becoming more simple, they create space. I want to be more simple by doing this. Let me build this outside of my life instead of removing or uncovering space, letting go of things. I've certainly connected to what you said. I think part of my own, the way I'm made up as a human being, it's actually very easy for me to detach from a lot of things, but there's ways where there's also just emotional bypassing, where I don't want to feel that difficult feeling. And so,

Paul Swanson: part of my own detachment practice is actually having to feel those things before I let them go. Otherwise, I'm just stuffing them, or I am—

Brie Stoner: I think that's so important.

Paul Swanson: Does that make sense?

Brie Stoner: Yeah, absolutely.

Richard Rohr: Well, it's very true. You're speaking, everybody, as a "nine," so any of you who are "nines" know that that's almost their problem, they detach too readily and give way to what everybody else wants them to think.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I wake up with like a blank slate, you know what I mean? If I had a really hard day the day before, I often would wake up and all those hard emotions, I'm not hooked to them, which it can be my own tragedy that I need to wrestle with.

Brie Stoner: I think it's difficult for us to let go of what we haven't first clung to or welcomed. I think this is a growing edge even in our contemplative circles of not making detachment, this rejection of, or pushing away of, but to first softly welcome the experience, the feeling, the thought, whatever it is, and then to really allow it in. I feel like it must have been during the Living School that one of you, as faculty talked about, detachment isn't an absence of passion or an absence of feeling, it's just the capacity to let the passion and the feelings run through and not get hooked on them. It's the capacity to know there's this ground underneath it, which I think is really valuable, and I'm glad you brought that up, Paul.

Richard Rohr: So many bad movements occur by overstatement and everybody getting on their high horse and stirring the worst instincts in a crowd, in other people. I don't know how you change that in the culture, but unless you do, you just don't have rationality or civility. We're coming rather close to that. For all the weaknesses of the '40s and '50s, we weren't nearly that way, nearly, you know—

Brie Stoner: Yeah, and I think that it's so valuable for us to consider and be aware of, to have the vision for where we are being stirred up and what sentiment or feeling is being stirred up within us, not just at a personal level, but at a cultural level. With all the rallies that are happening, for instance, to be aware of, well, what is it rallying?

Richard Rohr: What is it rallying?

Brie Stoner: What emotion is this actually trying to tap into? Is it fear? Is it hysteria? I don't know. I think your perspective there, Richard, on having a cultural awareness of

Brie Stoner: the role of feelings and how it's pushing us into certain kinds of actions or behavior is really important.

Richard Rohr: It is giving demagogues and not so smart people a lot of power they don't deserve because there's no free individual. I'm not talking about individualism, but a person who can resist mob psychology, who can resist the loud voice, or the clever put down, or the four-letter word.

Paul Swanson: I was just thinking on a humorous note. I grew up in Minnesota, there's like what I would call like a Zen Minnesotan mindset at times when it comes to weather where it's like the seasons are so harsh and distinct that there's always alive in conversation, "Well, this'll pass. Something else will come new." So no one ever kind of like gets too caught up in what's the

current state of the weather. To use that as a metaphor—

Richard Rohr: Because this will pass.

Paul Swanson: Because this will pass.

Brie Stoner: It turns out you're not a "nine," you're just from Minnesota.

Richard Rohr: Minnesota nice.

Brie Stoner: I don't know if I've mentioned this before, but there's a story of Thomas Keating that I really love on guilt where someone comes to him and says something about how they've been feeling guilty about something they've done for weeks and weeks and weeks. And Thomas says, "Guilt only lasts a number of minutes," I'm paraphrasing here but, "Guilt only lasts the number of minutes it takes for you to recognize that you've misstepped. The rest isn't guilt, it's your own neuroses." I love that story, and it's so helpful. One of the things I'm wondering, Richard, is what is, in your opinion, the role of conscience in our actions and our feelings?

Richard Rohr: Let me say first of all that I don't think we trained our people in—Catholic or Protestant—in the development of conscience because they would need the clergy less. We really didn't want them. We won't admit that, but it's the first rule in Catholic moral theology, but you don't hear a priest saying it very much. You must follow your conscience. That's the first. The second rule is, and it's fair enough, but you must form your conscience. Why was that so seldom taught? Why didn't we see it as helping people form their conscience, building on what we said yesterday: experience, scripture, tradition. We spiritual bypass—well, it's much easier just to let Father, or the pastor, or the minister be your conscience, and we created a very infantile Christianity because of that. I'm going to look for a quote, I think it's in Romans. Paul can edit this if I take too much time.

Brie Stoner: Sword Drill.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: What did you say?

Brie Stoner: Sword Drill. It's the Bible game that we used to play.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, we should have three Bibles in here so that we could all try and see who can find it first.

Brie Stoner: See who gets to Romans first to get this reference.

Paul Swanson: To get the sticker on your chart.

Brie Stoner: Some Baptist who is listening right now, already has it.

Richard Rohr: I bet they don't. Yes. It's one of the few times, if maybe the only time, it's Romans 2, Verse 13: "It is not listening to the law but keeping it that will make people holy in the sight of God." Practices over belief. "For instance, pagans who never heard of the law but are led by

their reason to do what the law commands may not actually possess the law the way we Jews do,” he’s saying, “but they can be said to be the law.” Oh, do you feel the danger in that? “They can point to the substance of the law engraved on their hearts. They can call a witness; that is,” and there’s the word, their own conscience, the inner conversation of accusation and defense, their own inner, mental dialogue. That’s genius.

Brie Stoner: Wow.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, that’s genius, Romans 2:13-15—they can call a witness; that is, their own conscience. This interplay of accusation and defense, I call it pitch and catch, where you throw out to God and you wait for a response sent back—their own inner mental dialogue. I wonder how many Christians have had that passage pointed out to them, because it felt like giving the individual too much power. Now I call it, as you know, “inner authority.” I admit fully, inner authority has to be balanced by scripture tradition, not just experience, but with people who can do that, you always see them come to calm, reflective, prayerful answers.

I have to admit it, in the Catholic Church, I’ve often seen it in nuns who are spiritual directors and Jesuits who get this training in discernment. For years, the only Catholic magazine I read was America, because if you wanted a civil, well thought out response to a contemporary situation, you went to the Jesuit magazine. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t left, it was free to critique the right and critique the left. It was just so refreshing. It was like some kind of station in between Fox News and MSNBC based on intelligence.

Brie Stoner: Richard, where would you put community in the balance of tradition, experience, and scriptures, particularly as it pertains to discernment and mirroring our own edges of growth?

Paul Swanson: Good question.

Richard Rohr: Let’s define community as something other than just a group. I just named two forms of community—your spiritual director, your Jesuit parish. There have to be some connections, your marriage—

Brie Stoner: Family. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: --some truth speakers who have authority in your life beyond you, who could say, “Honey, you’re filled with yourself right now. Cool it.”

Brie Stoner: It’s never quite that polite, actually. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Let’s define community the way Jesus seemed to have first done, “two or three gathered in my name,” so when many people think of community, it’s the big institutional group or the Sunday morning parish, which really you have little real accountability to. But these smaller two’s and three’s, friends, marriage, director, therapist, people that learn how to listen to them and give them authority in their life can talk sensibly, which we desperately need in our society.

Brie Stoner: Would that form part of the larger “T” tradition for us or would that be part of the experience bucket when you describe—

Richard Rohr: It will be experience critiqued, and it would be open to tradition, open to people who know more about what the response might be than I do from other—

Brie Stoner: The humility—

Richard Rohr: --teachers, saints, mystics. We Catholics always had a little saint's quote to pull out. That was Tradition. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: A nice thing about when that true community forms, for me, it is often in those two's and three's and usually outside of the walls of an institution, too, that I find myself asking questions that I'm afraid to ask alone, but if I feel the safety in that group of two or three, I know that I'm on sacred ground and that vulnerability will lead us to even a deeper sense of community, even though I'm on the edge of myself, or what I think I might know or not know.

Brie Stoner: I also find it's with the two and three's that you can make yourself vulnerable to being mirrored back and where you're needing to grow, or where your growing edges really are to say, you know, "Here's what I'm struggling with," or even in

Brie Stoner: the process of discernment, "What do you see in me? What are you noticing that I'm having a hard time seeing?" which is so valuable.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I remember at Creighton with one of my Jesuit professors in a class on discernment ...

Richard Rohr: Who was it?

Paul Swanson: The professor getting after us because we weren't laying all of our cards out on the table. We weren't being transparent enough with ourselves to discern. He's like, "How are you going to discern if you're not in touch with where you're actually at and you're not laying it all out there so you know which piece is of value and which piece is actually harming you?" I think that's part of it too. It's only in that safety where you can be mirrored in such a way that you can be free to put all your cards on the table. I do want to thank the Jesuits for that toolbox.

So, Richard, I do think that emotions are somewhat suspect in certain religious circles almost as if we can't admit that Jesus felt deep grief, and passion, and joy, and camaraderie. How have you seen your own emotional life change from being a young fryer to where you are now in a more embodied way? How have you seen that emotional life shift?

Richard Rohr: One of the worst effects—and I'm not saying they were all bad effects—of celibacy and worldview where obedience was idealized almost as the highest virtue, is that it taught you quite early—I got started at fourteen—when you're having these huge swings of emotion and it probably was good that there was some training in bounding them. But being trained so early and in celibacy and obedience, what you got was a PhD in repression, not trusting them, not allowing them, not listening to them, which I think created a lot of unhealthy men in the long run, who had a rather a superficial inner life because they didn't know how to feel the love of God deeply either, or they didn't know how to feel the pain of the poor deeply either. There was a lack of empathy, sympathy. They didn't even know that they had it.

But you're asking about me. I guess what I'm saying is I was one of those because you had to just succeed at this game, and yet it wasn't all a game. It did give me a bounded self. It did give me a sense of self. It also gave me a sense of righteousness. If unconditional love hadn't broken through in my novitiate year when I was eighteen-nineteen, I think I would have become a real curmudgeon, because I was rather successful at the first task. Do you understand? I was good at repression. I was good at boundary making. I was good at saying "no" to myself. It would have been what was an advantage maybe from fourteen to seventeen to make me grow up a little bit, would have started becoming sick. Thank God the '60s came, and I had some wonderful professors and some wonderful human growth classes, workshops all in the early '60s, such a marvelous time.

Little by little, I was given permission to feel my feelings, to make mistakes, to recognize my feelings were not the only feelings, which is a big part of it, that another person who's also a Franciscan and a good person can have different feelings about the same thing. All of that teaches you the way of love without you even realizing it. That pretty much was the name of the game in the '60s, and why by 1968, more nuns and priests left than any other year in recorded history the thing had so blown open and people who had utterly repressed-- Now, I think to be honest, I think some made a mistake they probably shouldn't have left, but it was so exciting to finally feel your feelings. I don't mean just sexual ones, I just mean anger about issues of abuse, or misunderstanding, or their father wounds, or their mother wounds, all those kinds of things.

We, overnight, were given massive permission and vocabulary to feel those things and to talk about those things in small groups. Now, I think our seminary was somewhat unusual in having those kind of workshops. Even during that period, a lot left in our school. It's a huge risk because your inner life now becomes a tyrant.

Brie Stoner: It can be. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, and it dominated your experience, "Why wasn't I allowed to think this or feel this?" Now it becomes the only thing I can think or feel. I saw it in my nieces after their first feminist class in college, and you can't take it away from them. They have to know that. But there is a bigger picture than just that, what men did to women. It's also what people did to people, and people did to Blacks and Browns and gays, and everybody else. You don't have enough empathy yet to broaden it. So, for at least six months, women are the most oppressed people in the world, and you must integrate that because it's partially true, but it's White girls in America who have the freedom to study that and the black girl in Africa doesn't even know that, even that little piece of knowledge might give her a little patience with it, "Let's make sure the Black women of Africa can also be liberated."

Brie Stoner: Well, that makes me think about the ways in which having a practiced stance, inner stance of forgiveness, seems to be crucial in allowing the emotional life to not be the only lens by which we see reality.

Richard Rohr: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

Brie Stoner: So, that inner stance of forgiveness, could you talk to us, Richard, about how forgiveness practiced for both self, for ourselves and for each other, personally and collectively, is

somewhat of a sacrament of personal and universal resurrection?

Richard Rohr: Hmm. I've said it for years, so I know it's repetitious for some listeners, but I've gone so far, and I think I still believe, that in a certain sense, the capacity to forgive, to give it and receive it, might just be the whole gospel. I'm willing to

Richard Rohr: allow that to be an overstatement even to make people struggle with it—to let go ahead of time, to for-give, to give yourself beforehand to the person, to the situation despite whatever facts have just been revealed. That demands a tremendous generosity of spirit that, frankly, is the mind of Christ, the Sacred Heart, the mind of God. It's not what the little self can do. The little self cannot forgive. It just can't. It's too stingy. It's still bounding itself. It's still creating itself. In the early stages of creating yourself, you do it by—at least, one of the quickest ways to do it—is by taking offense, victimhood, what was done unto me that was wrong or unfair.

You have to do that, but when it becomes your identity is what was done to you, not who are you in God from the moment of your conception, but because we in the Church haven't taught him about the true self/false self, that's almost all our culture has left. Is not who I am from all eternity and what source I can draw upon, but, "She did this to me. My mother did this to me. My father did this to me." I'm not saying there isn't a place that that has to be worked through. It does, but you better have at least your finger on a deeper source, or you'll waste ten to fifteen years. You will be so ingrained in a negative identity, an oppositional victimhood, that you think it's you.

It's one of the reasons I founded the center that I recognized in so many social activists, they did not know how to act. They only knew how to re-act. They only knew how to be against. When you'd ask them just to praise God, let's put it in that form, they lost all their energy. But if I can show how Ronald Reagan is an idiot, boy, they were filled with emotion and how can you feel the same emotion that God is faithful? "Well, yeah, I know I believe that, but let's not waste much time there. I'd rather gather my energy about how wrong Ronald Reagan's nuclear buildup is." And, of course, I agree with that, but you could see in so many people, they did not know how to motivate themselves unless there was a problem. There had to be somebody, some cause, some issue to be against. I want to say I'm happy we have such fighters, but when that's all you have is fighters, what do you do after you win the revolution, you know, I'll just use that silly example, after Ronald Reagan is no longer in office? "Okay, what do I do now?"

Paul Swanson: Thanks, Richard. In that spirit of acknowledging the necessity and the ripeness of blessing and trying to cultivate a sense of that and not just hold the reaction and the speaking truth to power, I wonder if you could end with a reflection on Philippians 4 here? This came to mind when Brie and I were in conversation and we frantically looked it up on our phones instead of our Bibles, because we didn't have them with us, but it was just speaking to us, as a way to end this, so I'm just going to read it here: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there's any excellence, if there's anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Brie Stoner: I think in some of the other translations, it's "dwell." "Dwell in such things."

Richard Rohr: Dwell.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Brie Stoner: Which is helpful.

Richard Rohr: Of course, I believe that Paul was a fellow “one” like me, and we are most inclined to the opposite—to what’s bad, what’s wrong, what’s stupid. I’ve been to Philippi and the little hovel that they know for certain was the jail. You just stand there looking at it, and you say, “To think he wrote that while being enchained in this dirty, little, ugly spot or within ten feet of it, he’s magnificently overcoming his temptation to one-ness, to resentment, “No, you must dwell on the positive.” That’s not just the naive power of positive thinking, it’s drawing your source from God instead of problem centered-ness.

Where I’ve seen this most consistently, and they’re dying off, I must admit, in my whole lifetime is old nuns. So many old nuns, just how did they learn that? I don’t know. But probably because they were women in the Church and seldom got their way, they had to dwell on what was positive, what was good, and they would name their orders “Sisters of Divine Providence.” “How good is the Good God!” blessed Julie Billiart. They’ve all had mottos that were calling their followers to a positive stance. It didn’t have the intense, social justice concern, but really it did, like Mother Seton “Live simply so others can simply live.”

I think our Church is really going to suffer from the lack of nuns, what I mean is women with spiritual depth and maturity proven over time. It wasn’t just the -knee jerk reaction, and we still see it in the social justice world, Network and such things, nuns on the bus, that these women who’ve spent years reflecting on the gospel have an authority, in our church, that usually, especially now, outweighs the priests and the bishops. It invariably comes to a positive place. If it doesn’t, they don’t have authority. It was just whining and complaining. Whining is not spiritual authority. It really isn’t. It evokes a low-level response.

Brie Stoner: It makes me think of that maxim that I think Cynthia says, where she says, “Energy flows where attention goes.”

Richard Rohr: Yeah, it’s a good line.

Brie Stoner: That if we can cultivate this spirit of what is true, what is honorable, what is just, what is pure, lovely—

Richard Rohr: It’s so good.

Brie Stoner: --to orient ourselves, to exercise that as a muscle, to turn in that direction inwardly, that feels like a great invitation for us today, Richard. Thank you.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you.

Richard Rohr: It’s the heart of contemplation to appreciate little things and to retrain the mind to know how to do that. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Beautiful.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard.

Brie Stoner: I love this one.

Paul Swanson: That's a great way to end!