

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 4, Episode 5
Ecumenical | Theme 4

Paul Swanson: On today's episode, we talk about the fourth theme of the Alternative Orthodoxy, which is Everything Belongs: No one needs to be punished, scapegoated, or excluded. We cannot directly fight or separate ourselves from evil or untruth. Darkness becomes apparent when exposed to the light.

This theme is one that encompasses, well, everything. Richard helps us kind of circle around some of the dualities that have really not helped us participate in a universe where everything truly does belong and some of the ways we've had misnomers about light and darkness. And he really helps bridge that gap in this conversation.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. One of the questions we had for Richard in the intro episode was do you see these themes as building on each other? And you can really feel that from the last episode to this one because we're moving one step further into the complexity of, okay, if there is one reality, then everything belongs and then how do we deal with shadow? How do we deal with evil? How do we deal with imperfection? We talk in this episode about how we grew up in a Christian paradigm that emphasized perfection and perfectionism to the point where we didn't include everything, not even within ourselves. We became very unforgiving, judgmental people.

I'm saying that as if it's in the past tense, which is really funny as if I have conquered this, everything belongs in Brie, I'm good. But, no, this is very much the growing edge for me right now is learning how to accept the parts of me that I almost intuitively want to push out and almost deny or separate and be like, "Oh no, no, that's not there. I don't make mistakes." I mean, obviously.

Paul Swanson: Obviously. And this conversation was so healing for me to think about growing up in that paradigm. And we had talked about how we were rewarded for pursuing that path to perfection, at least appearing that way. I'm going to have to listen to this one a couple of times to make sure that I can continually be able to be reminded of this and have it really be built into how I'm experiencing it in my body so that I can hopefully let a little bit go of that perfection tendency that I have that I was raised in and just see that that imperfection in myself is actually part of my belonging.

Brie Stoner: Blech. It is so hard.

Paul Swanson: So hard.

Brie Stoner: It is so hard not to scapegoat inside of ourselves and with each other. And that's another theme that we talk about in this episode is how we tend to "other" and think in terms of us versus them and that mechanism of scapegoating [music]—

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Brie Stoner: --and Richard shares with us how deeply influenced he was by René Girard and understanding that scapegoating mechanism that seems to have been with us historically from the beginning.

Paul Swanson: And how Jesus reveals the fallacy of that scapegoat maxim by taking that upon himself. Yeah, this is a really heartening and deep conversation. And with that, let's turn to the fourth

theme of the Alternative Orthodoxy. [music ends]

Brie Stoner: We're diving into the fourth theme of the Alternative Orthodoxy on this episode, which is Everything Belongs: No one needs to be punished, scapegoated, or excluded. We cannot directly fight or separate ourselves from evil or untruth. Darkness becomes apparent when exposed to the light. Paul, do you have a story that can put flesh on this tenet?

Paul Swanson: I do. I do. So, for a season of my life, I worked in Yosemite National Park and I had the beautiful job of filling vending machines with candy and soda. But part of my instinct to go there was as a part of this volunteer group called the Christian Ministry In The National Parks. So, what we would do, we would hold prayer services on Wednesday evenings, and then also kind of lead a church-like service on Sunday mornings for people in the park. And there was one time I was tasked with leading the prayer service on Wednesday night. And it was kind of in the midst of my deconstruction, trying to reorient to how do I participate in the life of Christ and life of the Church, as I was questioning a lot of the things I'd been taught in my early childhood.

And so, I was leading this prayer service and what I had decided to do was to alternate between reading Psalms and poetry. So, poets of the earth like Mary Oliver, Jim Harrison, Ted Kooser, or just folks who I felt really embodied that sense of, especially when you're in a place like Yosemite, which is grandeur in beauty, like, how do we evoke the first Bible in that way? And three of my friends had said they were going to come support me. And this sounds like a joke, but one was a Buddhist, one was Jewish, and one was an atheist. And they were going to come to participate in the service because I was leading it. The service was fine. We alternated between Psalms and poetry, but my friends never showed up.

Once everyone left the little chapel, I walked outside and there were my three friends sitting on the porch, smoking a cigarette, saying that they didn't go in because they didn't feel like they belonged. And it was in that moment I had this sense of like what am I doing? How am I in this community of friendship? But there's this barrier between a chapel door they feel like they can't enter? That they can't participate because of what it represents for them.

So, it began kind of my first time of living the question of if we're all connected, if all of humanity is a part of this great, beautiful world of gods, how do we connect to one another and support one another in this when in some ways they felt like because of their own history, they've been scapegoated by the Church? They were the other. And so, it really was like one of those turnkey

Paul Swanson: moments for me of like the cognitive dissonance was just so strong. And so, it was my first inkling of this theme of I was drawn to everything belongs, but I didn't have the language for it until I came here. But it was that first taste of something's off here.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Was it even an interfaith chapel or—

Paul Swanson: It wasn't an interfaith chapel.

Richard Rohr: It had a cross on it, huh?

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It's this beautiful little chapel in Yosemite. Yeah. I think the—

Richard Rohr: Yeah, the Christian connotation.

Paul Swanson: It was just too strong, and I know their love for me was to show up, but they just couldn't do it. And there's no fault to blame on anyone, but it was just that sense of how do we have that sense of participation where even they were just going there to support me, not to necessarily participate in the service itself, but they couldn't even cross the barrier of the threshold of that door. And just, how am I living that? I want to have that wide-open spirit of Christ eating with everyone and being in communion with all people. And it was that first, that deep cognitive dissonance that just really just riled me in that moment. So I didn't have the language, but that instinct for everything belongs was starting to grow within me.

Richard Rohr: Many people, Jewish people for sure, have experienced the cross and the Christian religion as a domination system, an oppression system. You know, it goes all the way back to that supposed apparition on the Milvian Bridge in Rome: "In hoc signo vinces. In this sign you will conquer." I'm sure you're too young to remember. Do you even know there was such a thing as Phillip Morris cigarettes?

Paul Swanson: Oh, yeah.

Brie Stoner: I didn't know that.

Richard Rohr: They don't exist anymore, do they?

Paul Swanson: No. They still exist. Yeah. They were the big tobacco.

Richard Rohr: Oh, they were the big one. Well, that was the irony of it then. If you ever go buy a package for however much they cost now and at least in my day on the seal, on the top of Phillip Morris cigarettes was a cross with In hoc signo vinces—

Brie Stoner: You're kidding.

Richard Rohr: "In this sign, you will conquer."

Paul Swanson: No way.

Brie Stoner: Oh my gosh. That is crazy.

Richard Rohr: That was Constantine's motto. Now, maybe they thought it was a Phillip Morris cigarette. I don't know. But isn't it ironic?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Oh my gosh. My everything belongs story also involves cigarettes. This is hilarious.

Richard Rohr: No, really?

Brie Stoner: It does.

Richard Rohr: We're into cigarettes.

Brie Stoner: We are anti-smoking in this place, but we're trying to include and transcend the previous stages where that may not have been the case. The first book I read of yours, Richard, was *Everything Belongs*. And it was in a time when I actually felt, Paul, like your friends who wouldn't go in. I had been a part of this really big Evangelical megachurch in Grand Rapids, Michigan. And it was really progressive and really well known with a deeply charismatic pastor. And when that container became too small for me and fell apart, it was sort of like, well now what? If the most liberal, progressive and cool and inclusive community is still, like, the shoes are still too tight on my feet. I have this deep feeling of loss, like I don't fit anywhere.

There's no Christianity that I feel consonant with. There's no church that I actually feel like I authentically belong to. So I felt like I got kicked out of the Garden of Eden of belonging and was just exposed into this wilderness time where I sort of transferred the pulpit into the stage and just took my Gibson guitar out to California and was playing shows and was a part of the beautiful artistic world of Silverlake and had an amazing roommate who lived with me out there. And she and I would have these deep discussions about faith and about tradition, but we didn't feel like we belonged anymore.

And it wasn't until I read your book, Richard, and you introduced me to the mystics that I had this deep sense of like, "Wait, what? Even this path of sort of leaving the Church, even that can belong in a spiritual journey? Are you seriously telling me I'm not lost? I'm not condemned?" Because in my former paradigm, you were either in or you're out, and that's it. My dad used to say, "You're on the road to ruin." [laughter]

Richard Rohr: The road to ruin.

Brie Stoner: So, I thought the whole time that I—

Richard Rohr: And from his paradigm, he was protecting you, of course.

Brie Stoner: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the whole time that I was out playing shows, and I didn't feel like I belonged to the Church, I was still reading Heschel. I was reading your work. And it was the sense of recognition that what, even this is a part of the spiritual journey? I'm not on the road to ruin? It was a miraculous kind of eye-opening experience that began, really, my exploration of contemplation in the mystics. But it was you mirroring that back, Richard, to say this journey you're on beyond the church walls is not only okay, but might be necessary. And I'd never had that before.

Richard Rohr: We separated the Jesus story from what Joseph Campbell called the monomyth, the one big myth of the hero. And the one big myth of the hero, and you can chart it, the hero, the would-be hero, always has to leave home, always leaves home base—the Buddha, Jesus himself. You never stay in Kansas. [laughter] I can get away with that because of the Wizard of Oz, you know. You have to be led into a different world to grow up. And we didn't allow that in Jesus to recognize, you know, that he had to leave Nazareth. And there was a reason people said, "Can any good come from that podunk town?"

But, here's the coming together of the arts and sciences that now we study literature and mythology

and we say, “Hey, there’s a big story here.” And you know what, we’re following the big story. That doesn’t lessen the truth of the Gospel as some initially fear. It, in fact, says, “No, if it’s true, it’s always been true and it will keep recurring over and over again. Why are you insulted by that?”

Brie Stoner: Oh, I do want to say something. I forgot to mention—

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Please, please. Take all the time you want.

Brie Stoner: The cigarette link is that I was smoking American Spirits while reading your book, feeling like a real rebel, you know? Like the Baptist had really, like, she had left home—

Richard Rohr: That’s a cigarette, American—

Brie Stoner: American Spirits with coffee and my Frye boots and feathers in my hair. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Oh God. I would have walked out.

Brie Stoner: You totally would.

Richard Rohr: No, I wouldn’t.

Brie Stoner: That was way too much for you, Richard. But anyway—

Richard Rohr: When did that cigarette appear?

Brie Stoner: Oh gosh, who knows?

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It’s been around.

Richard Rohr: So you all know it, American Spirits?

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Does it still exist?

Paul Swanson: I think it still exists. This is going to sound like an oxymoron and it is, it’s like the cleanest. I think there’s like less additives.

Brie Stoner: Quote unquote, “the cleanest.” Anyway, sorry Richard, share your story.

Richard Rohr: You didn’t smoke America-- Oh, you did, too. I’ve just lost all hope in you [Katherine? @ 00:13:00]. [laughter] No, no, no.

Well for me, it’s so tied to the priesthood that was given to me, I guess as a calling, as a gift, but also as a prison. Because in the Catholic Church, the supreme way you exercise priesthood is by celebrating the Eucharist. In a thousand ways, in the first ten years already, I came at funerals and weddings upon this phenomenon of people feeling they weren’t welcome to come because they weren’t Catholic, they were not believers, they were not moral enough, or worthy enough. And knowing, frankly, that many bishops enforce this, like even the bishop

in Cincinnati. Someone reported that I celebrated a lesbian commitment ceremony and let them all receive Communion. I was so hoping it would remain a secret, but it didn't. Now, I talked my way out of it. But this is, for most priests, still a major tension.

Because if you're a diocesan priest, parish priest, we use these words. See, I'm not. I'm a religious order priest, and we're of a different ilk because our job isn't to run the parishes to keep the church system going. So, I had a certain degree of freedom in retreat houses and missionary countries, and then at New Jerusalem. So, I was largely able, to this day, to welcome everybody to the altar. I don't need to say it anymore. I found out people were recording me if I said it to report this to the bishop. Now, our present Bishop would understand, I think. But here we have exclusion systematized. You know what I say, when you can't criticize it, when in fact it's enforced by holy laws, for me, that's the demonic.

Richard Rohr: I'm not saying the bishop is demonic. I'm not saying people who enforce it are, but the structure itself, when it's above criticism. I mean, I have priest friends, "Richard, you don't give the Eucharist to everybody, do you?" I say, because now, of course, I have a Pope who backs me up, "It is not a prize for the perfect. It is not a reward for good behavior."

How did we turn this around? Pope Francis, in his first months as a priest, calls the Church a field hospital, the admission that all of humanity is wounded. We all are unworthy, and the Eucharist is a healing gift. We used to use the word viaticum. That was the last Eucharist you received before you died. It means what you take with you on the way, vi-at-i-cum, viaticum. And he said, "We all need viaticum." We need this for the journey, not to feel, "Well, I'm in the club." And we've pretty much made that the norm, the norm. It just breaks my heart that people of such quality, that's the power of systemic agreement and the fear of punishment that you just, rather than risk it, you go along with.

Paul Swanson: In light of this theme and what's been shared, I want to read a brief passage from your book, *Eager To Love*, which goes like this: "The greatest enemy of ordinary daily goodness and joy is not imperfection, but the demand for some supposed perfection." Richard, can you further unpack how this demand, kind of self-imposed demand, for supposed perfection is an obstacle to recognizing the goodness and joy in everything belongs?

Richard Rohr: How you treat the self, and if your spiritual journey is a journey to become perfect, you and I now know you don't really exclude it or get rid of it. It takes more subtle form. Like you deny your real feelings. You deny your sexuality, but everybody around you can see you're a rather unpleasant person. You're kicking the dog, as it were. You're resentful very quickly. I can spot it immediately. And then I'm afraid I'm unkind sometimes. I'll say to myself, "Frustrated celibate." [laughter] "Why is he so grumpy or why is she so nasty?" Why did some nuns-- I never had any nun hit me, but what I'm saying is, of course, when you really try to eliminate imperfection, you try the impossible and the body especially reacts. It gets its vengeance, the emotions get their vengeance, and everybody else can see it except you. So, it doesn't work.

So, my main jumping to my conclusion is the goal of Christian spirituality is not perfection, it's union. Just stay with that. There is the whole answer. And union isn't the same thing as in any game of elimination, it's a game of love, of vulnerability, of mutuality, of giving and receiving, forgiving and accepting. If the goal of Christian spirituality or any spirituality is union, then

you won't waste much time on the path of perfection.

Now, I say that with some hesitation, because I do know our medieval Catholic mystics, even the two Teresa's, whom I love desperately, use the language of perfection an awful lot. That's where earlier Christianity was. Thérèse didn't believe God could love her except in her imperfection, because I think she knew

Richard Rohr: she sincerely tried to be perfect and could not achieve it. So, she had the honesty to go there. But it's probably the one thing that disappoints me in Teresa of Ávila. She's such a master of the spiritual life, but even in her later books, she will use the word of perfection.

Now, I'd love to know a real scholar of Teresa, do they think she's really talking about union? I know John of the Cross is. He gets there, and I'm sure she gets there existentially, existentially. But she, dang it, keeps using that word perfection. One final thing, it's a need of the ego to be perfect. It's not a need of the soul. The soul revels in shadow. You see? Yeah.

Paul Swanson: That's so helpful.

Brie Stoner: It's so helpful, but it's so hard. It's so hard because for many of us, perfectionism is completely synonymous with Christianity—

Richard Rohr: I'm afraid you're right.

Brie Stoner: --and spirituality. And so, we've spent our lives trying to, whether the instinct was of the soul or ego, it's hard to tell. Sometimes you can see it; sometimes you can't. Like, what's motivating me to continue to try to grow and evolve, or try to become more like Christ. And I can forgive mistakes and imperfection in myself when they're dumb mistakes, but when the mistakes are big and costly and have hurt somebody I love, it's so hard for me to forgive myself for being human in that way. I don't know how not to just be consumed by that. And I just wonder how many other people feel that as well. And this tenet, is so profound because it invites us to really work with that. It reminds me, and I know I've been saying, "I've been spending some time with Brené Brown lately," but she has a book called *The Gifts of Imperfection*, and in that, it feels like it's basically this whole tenet—

Richard Rohr: Yeah, it's the same.

Brie Stoner: --that everything belongs. That no part of me needs to be punished, or scapegoated, or excluded. If I can put it in that way, that I don't, and that I can't directly fight or separate myself from my humanity and the parts of me that make a mistake. And that the only thing I can do in good conscience is to bring that into the light and say, "Yeah, I made a mistake and it hurt somebody I care deeply about." And that makes me human, and I'm sorry. And I need to just accept that and go on. But why is it so hard Richard? Like, why is it—

Richard Rohr: Because the ego does not want to bear the humiliation of something it can't do. Like it—

Brie Stoner: Can't fix. It can't fix it.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, it so disappoints me when, I mean, you must hear it every day on TV if you listen, "My mother taught me I could do anything I wanted to do." That's a lie. You can't really.

But the reason that phrase is so common is it's the ego speaking. And to be fair, it's the first half of life speaking. So, God works with that. It's almost, you necessarily have to try that first and then collapse and realize it's undoable. Like Paul's wonderful phrase in Romans 7, you know, "The law was given to make us know that we can't obey the law." I talk about this in this new book on evil, which I know you've both read cover to cover. That is an extraordinary phrase: "The law was given us to let us know we can't obey it."

Brie Stoner: It's like right there. You're never going to do it perfectly. It's never going to happen.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: I think, too, in the traditions that we grew up in, we were rewarded for our attempts at perfection.

Brie Stoner: That's right.

Paul Swanson: We thrived, we were the golden children of this.

Richard Rohr: Oh! Me too!

Brie Stoner: Conditioned.

Paul Swanson: And it's only through that experiential falling that's like this is not a sustainable plan for me through adulthood, but it hurts like hell to learn that lesson over and over again because it goes against everything that I was rewarded for as a boy.

Richard Rohr: That's right. But just know, in fact, if you hadn't done that first journey, if you were just a lazy nine, [laughter] you didn't try to be a good little boy, I don't know that you would appreciate the gift of grace, the gift of the second journey. [Note: Fr. Richard is referring to Paul's Enneagram type "nine." There are nine Enneagram types.] I just opened to the very quote. It's Romans 8:7. "Human nature left to itself is opposed to God. It does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot." It cannot! And that's much my point in this. It's an absurd universe, is the discovery that Paul comes to. We can't be this perfect. Creation had frustration imposed upon it, but for divine purposes, Romans 8:20. This is his law of sin and that all of us cannot avoid, a basic absurdity underlying reality.

Brie Stoner: That basic absurdity makes me think of how in art what makes something truly beautiful is not perfect symmetry, not perfect balance.

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's a good metaphor. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: But in fact, it's the inclusion of the odd detail or this particular balance of negative space that's just asymmetrical. And I feel the ways in which that invites us to see that that frustration that's built into the universe may just be the very thing, all that imperfection, may be the very thing that draws us deeper into love and deeper into relationship with each other because even as I'm giving this example of making mistakes and hating myself for it, it's also in those making mistakes and in community with each other when people in my life mirror back, like, "Hey, you're not your worst mistake. I love you. You are loved" then I can accept myself, then everything does belong. So, maybe it's built in so that we can love each

other somehow? Maybe it's all part of it? I don't know.

Richard Rohr: There you go. That's good. The wound does belong. That's what the cross is saying and why the risen Christ still has wounds. The wound belongs even in "reorder," even in the resurrected stage.

Paul Swanson: Right in that point of how this thread of forgiveness has been apparent in all of these themes, too, whether it's self-forgiveness or forgiving the absurdity of the world.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes, yes.

Brie Stoner: So, let's turn now to not just accepting our own imperfection, but the ways in which we scapegoat each other and us-versus-them thinking and the ways that we project that otherness out. I want to read a quote from your meditation book, *Yes, And*. . . where you say, "When any church defines itself by exclusion of anybody, it is always wrong. It is avoiding its only vocation, which is to be the Christ. The only groups that Jesus seriously critiques are those who include themselves and exclude others from the always given grace of God."

Richard Rohr: Oh, I'm glad I wrote that.

Brie Stoner: That's pretty good, Richard. [laughter] But that's like, that stands in critique of what I feel like is the majority of the Christian religion—

Richard Rohr: It's the norm.

Brie Stoner: --to be exclusionary. How did we get that way?

Richard Rohr: How did that happen? You know, you've heard me say in other contexts where when I first discovered René Girard and his study of the scapegoat mechanism, when he said that he believes the scapegoat mechanism is the most universal social phenomenon on this earth to form every culture, every institution, it first seems like a massive overstatement. Play it out like people, greater scholars than I for sure, like James Alison, have played it out. My God, you keep saying it's true again and again and again. Every group seems to form itself by being

Richard Rohr: against another group. It doesn't know what it's for. It just knows who it excludes. And it's a seeking of a kind of moral purity, moral superiority. I think he's right. It was the greatest gift given to me, the study of René Girard, after I left the seminary of any other scholar. It's just, my God, I kept having to close the book. Well, this explains everything. And we used to say, "Crux probat omnia! The cross proves everything." I'm trying to impress you with my Latin.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it's working. [laughter]

Brie Stoner: With all your Latin phrases. You know what we used to say?

Richard Rohr: What?

Brie Stoner: Some Latin.

Richard Rohr: Oh, you did too?

Brie Stoner: No, I'm making fun of you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Oh, and I'm too dumb to know. [laughter] *Crux probat omnia*, yeah. You understand because the cross is a giant symbol of scapegoating. And then we call this the salvation of the world. So I think Girard is right. It gave me the complete freedom, by the way, to accept the Franciscan Atonement Theory. I finally had a psycho, sociological, historical analysis that, you know, our understanding of the cross is not an act of rebellion, it's an act of understanding of how human society works. But until we recognize the universality of the scapegoat mechanism, like where I see it in myself, when something breaks, let's just take it—I bet even you with your beloved little children—your first temptation is, “Why did you do that?” or to find out who did that.

Brie Stoner: To blame someone. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Someone has to be blamed, “Didn't I tell you not to put that glass on the table?” That's scapegoating at its lowest level, but it for a second takes away your responsibility and that's what we want. “I didn't cause it, you caused it.” Or just the common phrase, “I told you so.” I'm now outside of the picture of moral guilt. You caused it. You did it. I do this every day. At least in my mind, you caused it. You caused this accident, not me.

Paul Swanson: I did that yesterday where I was putting my dishes by myself, I'm alone in the kitchen and a glass fell, and I blamed my wife. In my mind I'm like, why does she put that glass there to dry?

Richard Rohr: There you go.

Paul Swanson: It was on the drying rack. Of course, it was there, but it was that I was able to laugh at myself and then tell her how it was her fault, but as a joke. But it was immediate. There was no thought processing.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. The scapegoat mechanism is unconscious.

Brie Stoner: The need to blame.

Richard Rohr: Did you break the glass?

Paul Swanson: I did break the glass.

Richard Rohr: You did, you terrible husband.

Brie Stoner: How could you do that? What's wrong with you, Paul?

Paul Swanson: I know. So, I woke her up to clean it up because it was her fault. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: It was her fault.

Brie Stoner: That need to blame is so strong. And it's so hard, almost like hardwired into how we interpret so many of the stories in the Scriptures. Even from the Garden of Eden, it's like,

“Who do we blame for this? Let’s blame the woman. Nope. Let’s blame the snake. Well, why did God put that tree there in the first place?” It’s like—

Richard Rohr: Someone’s got to carry the fault.

Brie Stoner: --it’s much harder to hold the complexity of love that can say—

Richard Rohr: Well put. Well put.

Brie Stoner: -to say, you know what, you didn’t cause it; you didn’t make it happen. No one is to blame. Sometimes there is just suffering. Sometimes things don’t work. Sometimes the glass falls even though it was your fault, Paul. [laughter]

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Even though it was my fault. I can finally own that and confess that here with you.

Richard Rohr: At least you didn’t blame your innocent little children. [laughter]

Paul Swanson: And taking this theme and thinking about sometimes when people hear “everything belongs,” they can kind of take it in at a somewhat shallow level where they can bypass doing work that can engage in the world or prophetic work. So, I’m wondering, Richard, like taking this theme, how does one hold everything belongs as an orientation and yet still engage in works of change or prophetic work?

Richard Rohr: There’s the complex question that has to be asked or otherwise we’re irresponsible in talking this way. We give people the impression, oh, you can drop into reorder. Just come down in a parachute and land in the world of reorder. Nope. In fact, you’ve got to bear the burden of imperfection, of wound, of problem, whatever it might be. Your first response has to be to try to fix it. And that attempt to try to fix it matters. It’s good energy. It really isn’t bad energy. It’s life energy. It’s not death energy.

But then you have to experience a further failure that you can’t fix it fully. I say in this new book on evil that can you ever think of any war or any revolution in history that was 100 percent successful? It was always successful for one group. It was always disastrous for another group. Always! The only entirely successful thing is universal forgiveness, which is the Gospel. But that doesn’t mean that you don’t carry the weight for a while, suffer the consequences, do what you can, and then realize that even what you do will be a partial remedy.

And so, you still go ahead and do it perhaps, but not with righteousness now, not with self-satisfaction that “I’ve solved the problem.” I think that was the great humiliation that Protestantism went through in the centuries after the Reformation, that it saw little Catholic churches rising up on a much smaller level than our sin, I admit. The human pattern is always there and you never eliminate human nature. If you’re Lutheran, or Presbyterian, or Baptist, there it is all over again.

And I have to collapse back in the example you’ve heard me use is, of course, the marvelous 1789 French Revolution, which the whole world quotes as a turning point for fraternity, equality, liberty. It’s on the front of every doorstep in Paris. But that eleven years later, things have so collapsed, we need Napoleon, a dictator, to put France back together again. That shows how unsuccessful this supposedly most important revolution, the French Revolution,

really was.

Or, we wrote our Declaration of Independence and it took us really until the middle of the last century where we began to see that we didn't mean it. It didn't include women to vote. It didn't include Black people. It didn't include White men who didn't own land. You'd say, "How could there be this much blindness?" "All men are created equal." And they meant all humans, but they didn't mean it. You have to forgive the perpetrator and those who are victims, both. But you can't claim a false victory in seeing that it's given to you. It's done unto you to allow you to love both the victim and even the victimizer.

Brie Stoner: I feel like something that helps me do that at times is to translate everything belongs into everyone belongs—

Richard Rohr: Oh, go ahead. Yes.

Brie Stoner: --because then I can say that the act, or the evil, or the instinct toward domination doesn't belong, but everyone belongs in that.

Richard Rohr: That's helpful.

Brie Stoner: Even this person who has maybe been conditioned to lead with power over and is acting in a way that is creating harm, they still have the Sacred Heart of Christ, even though I don't agree with their choices, which allows me to then say, "Okay, as long as I can speak against prophetically without condemning this person, then I feel like I'm finding a path into action that still allows everyone to belong." I'm not going to exclude or demonize and say, "It's all this person's fault," or, "It's all this group's fault," or, "I'm not going to scapegoat." But—

Paul Swanson: Yeah, and was it Merton in his letter to young activists where he talks about not being attached to the outcome?

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Probably.

Paul Swanson: Like doing that work with that purity of love, but not trying to force an outcome or have that outcome be the telltale sign that you've succeeded. And that seems like the right spirit in which to engage in this kind of work.

Brie Stoner: But it's for sure a tension, right?

Paul Swanson: Oh, totally.

Brie Stoner: I mean, to hold everyone belongs there, everything belongs, and to also move into the fire of prophetic work is, it almost feels like a contradiction, but it's not. And I wonder, Richard, I know you've been deeply influenced by Liberation Theology. And I wonder how has your inclusion of Liberation Theology and study of Liberation Theology, how does that find its way into this tenet?

Richard Rohr: I think, and you know when it hit me in the mid-eighties, when I was giving retreats in Central America to the Maryknoll community. Maryknoll was the progressive American

Catholic religious order that went to every poor country in the world. If you wanted to meet the radicals, and I mean radical in a good way, it was Maryknoll. And yet, when I got among them, I met a lot of frustrated, depressed, even angry, disillusioned, one of those words applied to so many of the priests and the nuns, it was both sides of the community that they hadn't had a spirituality in many cases, who am I to judge in all cases, but in many cases equal to the suffering and the injustice that they experienced. They at least got external liberation, but a lot of them didn't have the skills to keep themselves free inside of that and healed from the immense injustice.

Richard Rohr: So, it influenced me really to found this center because I was given those retreats from the late 70's through the early 80's in Central America, in Asia, in Africa. And again and again, I saw the same pattern. So, without some ability to put action and contemplation seriously as equals, both of them as equals, I came to believe there was no way to make everything belong. Now to move it to a more specific level, I remember, and I hope this will never be heard by anybody as a judgment of anybody in particular, but this was the middle of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, and I met Maryknoll priests on both sides.

I much more admired the Sandinistas who were actually involved in the government, but now they were pretty angry, if not hateful, toward the rich of Nicaragua. And yet, at least several of them when I visited their houses and who am I, I'm living in an American house, but were living rather well themselves. So, they had come into the upper class, hating the upper class. The whole thing felt like a charade, you know? You can't see what you're doing because you're too much a part of it. You've found a way to build yourself a beautiful house with art all over it, nothing against art.

Brie Stoner: Thank you, Richard. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: I'm just getting real specific. This is very disillusioning for me. And it wasn't most of them by any means, but the very ones who are most angry at the rich, not all of them, not all of them by any means. It's just several, had become rather overly comfortable themselves and I couldn't help but think that their anger at the rich had allowed them a false projection, a false scapegoating. They couldn't see their own clericalism, their own participation in the upper class, their own influence of maybe, maybe, I don't know, some degree of Marxist analysis because it's half true. I'm probably a Marxist if I'm going to say it's half true. But as we were told when we were novices, you've heard me quote it. The first week after we had our heads shaved and wore the brown robe in the novitiate, I was nineteen and it's 1961, we're extremely anticommunist in America.

And we were all sitting there, very earnest to be taught. And he says, "Well, boys know that you're all Communists." We just sat there. Oh my God, what does that mean? But he said, "There's a big difference between voluntary poverty done for love and poverty that's done out of force, or duress, or commandment, and it's forced on other people, but not yourself. Because we found out in every communist country, there was always a remaining upper class who lived quite comfortably in Russia and China and everywhere else. So anyway, the complexity of the scapegoat mechanism came home to me. that when you project elsewhere your own fault, when you can't see it, on some level you end up doing the same damn thing but at a level it's denied. It's really complex.

Brie Stoner: It seems to be why we so desperately need a contemplative or nondual perception and approach to Liberation Theology, right? Because the need to name the systems of oppression and the people who are oppressed and that very real experience, that has to be named, has to be declared. It has to be

Brie Stoner: seen. And we, all of us together, need to move into an exodus of liberation away from that. But we have to learn how to do that in a way that doesn't perpetuate that scapegoating mechanism, that turns everything into a dualism of oppressor and oppressed, that scapegoating of, you know-- So, I really appreciate the tension you're naming, Richard, and how you seem to be drawing a mystical lens into Liberation Theology with this tenet.

Richard Rohr: The true Gospel wants to liberate both the victimizer, believe it or not, and the victim. Jesus does: "Father forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." Yeah. I would say like most secular feminism does not understand that. It really doesn't. When I used to teach the pedophiles up here at Jemez Springs, I recognized, and it was hard to do, I had to forgive the pedophiles and recognize they still bore the image of God. That doesn't mean we can free them to hurt children. No one wants to do that. It's completely acceptable to treat pedophiles like lepers. The Gospel is that big. It's that huge that, "whoa," I can see why most people don't get there.

Paul Swanson: How do we practice this through that mystical lens? How do we practice the sense of everything belongs in our day to day, knowing that it is so big, and it can be hard to bring into the very reality and smallness of our own human lives? How do we do that? How do we practice?

Richard Rohr: It's probably a thousand choices and conflicts, necessary conflicts over the course of a lifetime. I don't know that you ever get there because emotionally, personally, temperamentally, there will always be some group you want to exclude, "I hope she doesn't come to the party tonight," you know, that kind of thing. "I hope he doesn't join the staff. I don't want him around."

Brie Stoner: He looked at you. [laughter]

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I noticed that. Jeez.

Brie Stoner: I think I saw that.

Paul Swanson: After twelve years, the truth comes out.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. It never stops. Never stops. So, it's a decision. Just like we say love is a decision, not to exclude is a decision. Like, I love to exclude from my dinner table, or dinner parties, or restaurant invitations, over-talkers. Why? Because I'm so damn used to being the talker-in-chief, I don't want anybody to compete with me. [laughter] I hope that isn't the whole reason, but there are people who just, well, is he going to give a monologue? Is he ever going to shut up? Just like over-talkers drive me crazy. So, I go out of my way in social settings, not to be an over-talker, but I'm sure why I see it is because I get away with it formally. Like you're letting me talk right now: "Richard can go on as long as he wants." So, it drives me crazy in other people. Isn't that interesting? Under-talkers don't

Richard Rohr: bother me unless they're really hiding from the group. But over-talkers, I just want to say, "Stop it. Just stop it." [laughter]

Brie Stoner: Well, speaking of talkers, should we turn to listener questions and take a look at what they have to say?

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Unknown Speaker: My question has to do with theme four, Everything Belongs, and the teachings of Ilia Delio, the scientist and theologian who argues so persuasively that all of creation runs on a love energy. We know that everything belongs. This isn't hard to grasp, but darkness, evil, which does belong, is it also then an aspect of this love energy? Is this a way that we can think about evil within that context, within that framework? And if that is so, what does that tell us about the love energy of creation?

Richard Rohr: It seems what both human relationships and science are trying to teach us is that for love to become big love, it has to have pushback, resistance, opposition to refine itself, to discover itself. How would you really learn to love your partner or your children if they didn't make it hard sometimes, and you have to choose why you love them or how you love them or if you love them? Now that we know that maybe ninety-five percent of the universe is dark matter and that there's an interplay between the darkness and the light, and even the dark is filled with fractals, this seems to be a principle of the universe that even the darkness, as we see it, is not darkness. There are these slivers of light through the entire dark nature of the universe begins with i, not isotopes, neutrinos. It doesn't begin with i, it begins with n, neutrinos.

As our cameras have gotten better and better, there is no such thing as absolute darkness. There are neutrinos so much so that some scientists would say there is only one light, just like there's only one of everything. There's only one light. And the entire universe is connected by neutrinos to this one light. There is never absolute light even in the 300 million light years between planets, or whatever it might be. Isn't that mind blowing?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Neutrinos. I don't know if it's true. I'm not smart enough, but at least a whole school of science says it's true. So, we didn't do the Gospel any favor. We just didn't have the mind for it by making the very word darkness a bad word, not to speak of its racist overtones.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: The bad effect this had on people of color, that darkness was bad, light was good. So, it's been bad all the way around that darkness is bad. If we wouldn't have had the John-of-the-Cross types, he's just the outstanding example. But I mean, there's Dionysius in the 4th century, Pseudo-Dionysius he's called, who already is speaking of necessary darkness. But in general, we had a theology of light.

And, again, let's get back to our transfiguration story, why when the Christ is revealed and the law and the prophets on the top of Mount Tabor, he tells them you cannot stay here. You

have to go back down into the mixed light of the ordinary world, which is shadow. And I'm sure you know this. You and I could not see those trees outside that window if there were not an admixture of darkness and light. Shadow allows us to see. Total darkness, you cannot see. Total light, if it was 100 percent light out there, I would be blinded by the light. Oh, these physical metaphors are so helpful, really so helpful.

Brie Stoner: I appreciate that you named there seems to be the need for some force of pushback—

Richard Rohr: Pushback. There you go.

Brie Stoner: --for creation and love to unfold. And it makes me think of how Cynthia Bourgeault uses that ternary metaphysics that she does, where she says there has to be a force that pushes up against an affirming force and a negating force. And then the third reconciling principle seems to move it out of impasse and into something new. And it's not to excuse the darkness or evil, but it's to say it's a force, and part of our role and part of what we're called to do is to see these forces as working somehow, being pushed up against each other is somehow necessary to the creative process of the universe. It's not to say, "Well, great. Let's just let it run amuck and take over." But I don't know. That helps me. That framework helps me think about it.

Richard Rohr: It's well put.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, well said.

Unknown Speaker: Is it really possible to love everything if everything belongs? What does this look like? Jesus? Can our own mundane, average, everyday life really look like Jesus? As a seven on the Enneagram, a Generalist Enthusiast, I'm sensing this sensation that has me bordering on crazy. I'm literally falling in love with everything, but my rational, literal mind tells me this is impossible. Help! I've started to believe that we really did indeed come from goodness, that we really are sustained by goodness and that we are going back to goodness. Thanks, Richard. You have been the catalyst releasing all of this within me.

Richard Rohr: I wish I knew your name.

Brie Stoner: That's so beautiful.

Richard Rohr: You made us all smile sitting here by your sincerity and your eagerness. That's the gift you sevens bring to the world to make it believable to people who are going to call you naive or innocent. I don't know what the word love connotes in your mind, but in most people's minds, it's an ecstatic union of some sort or a deeply felt union. I think what the Gospel gives is the gift to at least like and not openly resist everything. I just want to make it a little softer, so you can ask that of yourself. You're going to find in your life's journey, your voice sounds young yet, that there's just many people who you don't find yourself in love with or even attracted to, but what's taken away from you is any desire to dismiss them, demean them, exclude them.

That's the kind of minimal respect, love, if you will, that we owe everything. But you do not need to like everything in the sense of being personally attracted to it, or she's my best friend, or he's my best friend, because most people will not be your best friend. In fact, the

psychologists say in your whole lifetime, you can actually sustain only three or four best friends. So, there are two of them are sitting together in this room. Yeah. And I suspect that's true.

Paul Swanson: And I think the thing those who embody love, there's a contagiousness to it that you're drawn to them even when they're speaking truths that are hard. Like I think of a Jesus, the way that people were drawn because of that outpouring love and it wasn't a false nicety. It was that love that transcends and transforms people. And if this gentleman is one of those people who is an attractor like that, it is a gift to the world because it has that potentiality to shift entire communities around him.

Richard Rohr: You're going to give good energy to whatever group you enter into. But not to puncture your balloon, but it will have to be tested, probably by one broken heart or one broken relationship. It has to happen once where, darn, I find it hard to see goodness in this person or, dang, I find it hard to see how this person is good. So, be prepared for that. Don't let it take away your lovely, lovely, and true optimism. You see the cup half full, and I envy you because by nature as a one, I see the cup half empty. Thank you. [music]

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

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