

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 4, Episode 7
Process | Theme 6

Paul Swanson: [music] On today's episode we talk about the sixth theme of the Alternative Orthodoxy, which is: The path of descent is the path of transformation. Darkness, failure, relapse, death, and woundedness are our primary teachers rather than ideas or doctrines. This theme really helps because it builds off the previous one. As we've kind of seen that continue to unfold, as we've been discussing these, how does this theme land for you, Brie, when you think of the path of descent?

Brie Stoner: I really wish this one wasn't true, but it's interesting because I think about the fact that heartbreak and creativity, I know it's almost cliché, but heartbreak and creativity go together.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: It makes sense then to me that failure, relapse, death, woundedness, mistakes are our primary teachers of transformation. They go together. There's something about the breaking down and breaking open that allows us to see differently and connect to each other differently.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I love the way that powerlessness was brought into this conversation. It's in those vulnerable states that we're not only able to be more connected to ourselves and to God, but to one another, and really see that we are all in this together.

Brie Stoner: Richard models this so well because he lives out of that radical vulnerability and humility. I mean, how many times have we sat here in the recordings and he just openly admits to like, "Yeah, I'm really terrible at this," or "I do this thing," or "I'm so proud," and I—

Paul Swanson: "I'm still doing this at my age."

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Yes. So, I love the invitation in this episode for us to live into this radical vulnerability, this humble heart that can embrace the failures, that can embrace the mistakes, that can embrace not being perfect. But also one of the things that came up in this episode that I really enjoyed is that we talked a lot about identification, to not get stuck there, to not identify overly with the story that we create when we do make a mistake or when there is a failure or a loss, and instead to allow it to move us into transformation and not knowing. So, what came up was that role of unknowing and not knowing even in this tenet of the path of descent.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, to not get stuck in that storyline or the narrative that we've been telling ourselves over and over again but to allow that unknowing to lead us in a sense of willingness to where we are being drawn to, where we are being led.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. We also were exploring the fact that for our consumeristic culture, this is nonsensical, right? Like, "Don't tell me that the path of descent is the right one," because we live in a culture and even in our world where everything is about ascent, and gaining, and attaining, and succeeding. I mean, this is a real humiliation of the ego, right, to live into this. [music]

Paul Swanson: And, we found that the path of ascent has often been part of we've been taught in

Christianity—

Brie Stoner: Oh, for sure.

Paul Swanson: --that this path to perfection, this path of doing more, of getting more, of getting more from God. As we talk about in this conversation, it is almost the opposite of what Jesus was teaching.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And so with that, we hope you'll enjoy this episode as much as you can when the topic is about descent on the sixth theme of the Alternative Orthodoxy. [music]

I hope you're all ready for this real downer. I don't know what to say.

Richard Rohr: Downer, that's good.

Brie Stoner: Did you see what I did there?

Paul Swanson: Well played.

Brie Stoner: Yes. Today's episode, we're exploring the sixth theme of the Alternative Orthodoxy, which is: The path of descent is the path of transformation. Darkness, failure, relapse, death and woundedness are our primary teachers rather than ideas or doctrines.

Paul, do you have any stories or experiences that match up with this tenet?

Paul Swanson: Gosh, I can feel my heart racing right now. This story is my big path to descent story in my journey. When I was in college, again, going through the heat of deconstruction, and it was also during the time of the building towards the Iraq War, I was getting more politically active in the peace movement in Chicago. I could just feel myself in this time just taking on more and more darkness in a way.

I was on the train in Chicago, and I saw these three young hip hop artists, and they were freestyle rapping about the war and what it was like to be a black

Paul Swanson: man in America. It was the straw that broke the camel's back. I just felt myself take on the despair of the world and feel like, "I'm going to put this on my back and I'm going to fix it. It's my job to do alone." As we've talked about before, putting the burden of sin on yourself is not yours to do, it's a collective, but I did my best to put it all on me. In that despair, sad to say, I went out and bought a bottle of bourbon as a way to try to escape from what I was feeling, this darkness.

Richard Rohr: Sure.

Paul Swanson: The next thing I remember is I woke up in the hospital.

Richard Rohr: Really?

Paul Swanson: My brother was holding my hand. I opened my eyes. There he is holding my hand. I don't know if he's crying, or praying, or both. I close my eyes because I'm like, "I have got to wake

up from this dream. This is scary.” And then I fell back asleep, and I woke up. The doctor took the catheter out, which is a very memorable moment. [laughter] I just remember I wasn’t able to speak. I was just so dehydrated. The doctor’s like, “Why did you try to kill yourself?”

Richard Rohr: Oh, my goodness.

Paul Swanson: I said, “I didn’t. I wasn’t trying to,” but I couldn’t speak because my voice was so dry. He’s like, “Just another college student, partying too hard.” I couldn’t get the words out. I went through this very dark season of depression, despair, not knowing what had happened, how I had come to this point. Thankfully, my brother was in seminary just down the street. He was an amazing aid. I talked to pastors and therapists trying to figure out like, “How did I get to this point?” I just couldn’t get out of this deep, dark funk.

For months and months, I was living like this, just seeking answers, crying out to God, like, “Where are you? Where are you?” And then months later, I was taking a test, of all things, and I heard a voice from within saying, “I love you just as you are. It’s not up to you.”

And so, I quickly finished the test. I’m sure it looked like I knew what I was doing, but I’m sure I bombed that test. I ran back to my apartment and just started writing in my journal. Just over and over again this voice got louder and louder and clearer and clearer of, “I love you just as you are. It’s not up to you.”

It was this renewal of not trying to be perfect anymore, but I needed to go through that. I mean, I don’t wish that on anyone. It was a terrible season of my life.

Richard Rohr: Sure.

Paul Swanson: But it was that path of descent, of going to my lowest low, and then having God speak to me and just say “I love you just as you are.” Through that relationship, in that intimate moment with God speaking to me like that, and through community of friends and support, I was able to fully feel that love. It spurred and energized me in a way where I was able to see that I’m just one part of the body. It’s not just up to me and that my role is to show up and love, and receive love, and give love.

It was a turnkey moment in my own journey of how I looked at my supposed sense of perfection and what woundedness could teach me and despair could teach me. It has made me a lot more honest with myself in my life about where I’m at and how I cannot fix this absurd world, but I can show up and do my small piece. So that was a big path of descent moment for me.

Richard Rohr: But it lasted a while, few months, years?

Paul Swanson: Yeah, months.

Richard Rohr: Months, yeah.

Paul Swanson: Months. And that falling into God was a complete surprise. I know I was crying out, working towards some sense of healing and some sense of newness, and I do love that it came when I was taking a test of all places. Here I am trying to get a good grade and all of a sudden just awash with the love of God.

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Paul Swanson: What a new life after that. It wasn't from point A to point B, but there's a lot of zigzags and a lot of inner work in that process too. So, it wasn't some miraculous moment, but it was God. Really, I was able to hear that whatever was obscuring me from seeing how I was participating in God and God was participating in me was revealed in that moment.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Can I ask?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: When you were there, did you find yourself, and you don't have to agree, returning to almost a simple, childlike understanding of your Christian faith?

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It was so simple and so beautiful. I didn't feel the need to have to—

Richard Rohr: Explain everything or you just grab it on. It's the truth of the shipwrecked again.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: You were shipwrecked and any log you can grab on to, those usually are the ones you were given as a little girl, a little boy. That's why we've got to give that to our kids because they're going to face such moments. Sophisticated theology is not helpful at that point.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: How about you two, Brie or Richard, does a story come to mind about the path of descent?

Brie Stoner: Yeah. First, I just want to thank you for sharing that story, Paul, because in it with such vulnerability, but in it, how you talk about the time, how long it takes. That oftentimes being in that state, we try to rush through and rush out of it, and we're not comfortable being in those spaces, and then we miss the opportunity to experience ourselves as transformed or hear that voice, that inner voice.

And so, you just brought up parenting, Richard. What came to my mind when I thought about this is where I currently am with my son, Soren, who's ten. I mean, first of all, nobody

told me that puberty starts so early. Nobody warned me that there were going to be really strong feelings at ten that were going to come out. But, you know, I'm watching him go through these experiences where hormones are just rushing through him, and he doesn't know what to do with it. He's having these angry outbursts, just at really small things, just really angry, and he just storms up to his room.

What I've started to do is I just go up with him. I go up to his room and then I sit down with him. I let him rage, and I let him fury. I let him have all that out and just sit there. I sit there with him. Sometimes I'll ask him, "Would you like me to sit next to you? Would you like me to hold your hand? I'm so sorry that this experience is so uncomfortable. I can see that your brain is trying to process a lot of stuff. It's okay that you feel these things."

I'm doing all these things, and I'm realizing in that experience of failure, "failure," what my parents—and, of course, I don't fault them for this—they would have just been like, "This is wrong. What are you doing? You're having these outbursts? How dare you?"

Richard Rohr: This is unacceptable.

Brie Stoner: Exactly. "This is unacceptable." When I move into that space with him, and I don't say to him that it's unacceptable, he's beginning to learn how to deal with those strong emotions, how to calm down, how to welcome them, and how to

Brie Stoner: not just dismiss them. And so, it's becoming an opportunity for him to learn something valuable, but it's also teaching me about love, that love sits with, that love moves into, that love doesn't say, "Cut it out."

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: That love is willing to hold space and take the time to go and sit and be with, yet it's so hard for me to turn that kind of love on myself. I can do it for my son all day long. But for me to imagine that when I am raging, when I'm heartbroken and wearing sweatpants for weeks on end, when I'm really miserable and sad, when I'm going through those times of darkness to think that somehow I'm still lovable in that, that God is sitting with me. Like you said, the voice that you heard, "I love you just as you are." Oh, it's so much harder to accept this ourselves, Richard, than it is to offer it to each other. I don't know if you both feel that way.

Richard Rohr: It sure is.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Definitely.

Richard Rohr: Of course. The one that comes to mind is not that profound but, again, has to do with my terrible One energy. [Note: Fr. Richard is referring to the Enneagram type One. There are nine Enneagram types.] When you're first growing up, being a good boy, doing it right, you don't realize it's just to make everybody love you, and it worked for me. My mother loved me. My daddy loved me. The "gooder" I was, the more I got affirmation. It carried over to the school. All the nuns loved Dicky Rohr because I'd stay after—I must have been obnoxious—erasing the boards for Sister.

I've gone back and given retreat at the mother house, the ones that are still alive, and they'd

say, "Oh, you were. You were the cutest little thing. You always did well." [laughter] It was only when I got older and began to take charge of my own life outside of that initial system, that my pushiness to be in control and to be right started to show itself as a vice instead of a virtue.

I remember when my own godmother, my aunt Helen, I was playing with the cousins, my cousin Donnie said, "Dicky, you always need to be in--" No, he didn't say control. "You always need to be in charge," or something like that. I said, "I do not." Then when my godmother, my aunt Helen, walked into the room and said, "Dicky, it's true, usually you're in control." It was just a stab in the heart that an adult, my game was not working, first for a cousin and then my godmother. I didn't forget that for days that even she said they were right.

But how many years it took until, I don't know, I got all the way through the seminary then, still getting love by being supposedly perfect, getting admiration by doing it right. It was such a descent to see the phoniness of all that. I don't think I began to really get free from it until after ordination in 1970. When I

Richard Rohr: didn't have a system to please, I could now do my own thing. In fact, I was in charge in almost every context I was in since then. So, that's when I started needing a spiritual director. I started needing a therapist to help me make this transition out of good boy to not "gooder" than anybody else and that felt like descent.

I know this is overlapping from the previous theme, but it was some years of near self-hatred, which, again, a One is very prone to. When you think you're not perfect, how could you be lovable?

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Richard Rohr: If anybody saw in me what I've now seen in me, no one would like me. So, the temptation for the disguise to go even deeper is stronger. It was twenty years of more and more subtle shadowboxing. The spiritual journey did not feel beautiful. It didn't feel graceful. Now, of course, that was the charismatic period, too, where we could raise our hands and sing in tongues. But even that felt often like a covering of my real feelings, to move into a somewhat pseudo ecstasy and pretend that I had earned that. Somehow it always had to be a matter of earning worthiness, doing it right, even praying in tongues right or preaching right. My very gifts of teaching and preaching had to be done right or I did not have the favor of God.

It's building on what you were saying. That sounds like no suffering, but it's an interior suffering. It's even more subtle. I'd say that in various forms that's continued until my old age. It isn't so true anymore, but I'm so much happier when I don't have to fight that battle of image and reality, image and reality. But it was a path of downward movement.

You've heard me quote Jung again. "My pilgrim's progress has been this, to slowly, slowly--" was it descend? I'm trying to remember the quote. You shouldn't give quotes, Richard, unless you're going to remember them. "--until I could reach out the hand of friendship to this little clod of earth that I am." "Slowly go downward till I could reach out the hand of friendship to this little clod of earth that I am." Oh, I like that.

But what's Jesus' word for that, or at least the word we applied to it? It's the Way of the Cross, which we literally, physically had on the walls of all of our churches, the Way of the Cross, and cultures that were totally preoccupied with climbing upwards.

Brie Stoner: It seems we turned Christianity, which you help us understand, Richard, is all about the path of descent.

Richard Rohr: It really is.

Brie Stoner: It's all about moving in and down and into reaching a hand of friendship, to even this, and even that, and even this part of ourselves and even with each other and that sacramentalizes-- Is that a word?

Richard Rohr: Yes, it is.

Brie Stoner: --reality, anoints reality itself as Christic, but our tradition turned it into a path of ascent. It turned into perfectionism.

Richard Rohr: That's right. You have to put it that way. Yes.

Brie Stoner: That's the very perfectionism that I hear as the thread in each of our stories is that that lens got placed in all of us in different ways—

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: --but I think so many of us struggle with it, because Christianity almost seems to perpetuate that idea of perfectionism as opposed to this version of Christianity, which is about incarnation and embracing it.

Richard Rohr: Now, just to say it directly, we turned the path of descent into a path of ascent. Ken Wilber, who doesn't identify as a Christian, says the same thing. There are ascending religions about purity codes, and moral behavior, and enlightenment, there are descending religions, which are about letting go, learning from suffering. In more than one place, he says, "It seems to me as an outsider that Jesus intended his followers to descend, but most of their history has been trying to ascend," golden crucifixes, and all the rest.

Paul Swanson: Richard, knowing that you're a little further down the journey than us, as you've experienced different failures and disappointments, are you able, as you've continued on the journey, been able to see them as teachers in that despair? Has that become an easier thing to—

Richard Rohr: It has certainly become easier, but it's also in some ways become harder because of all the ideal images people have projected onto me, that I feel I have to live up to being this holy old man or this humble old man. Or as you've heard it said very often, it's lonely at the top because you carry so many projections, both positive and negative. People project all kinds of things onto you while you're an absolute idiot because I've seen through your shadow in disguise, and you know they're half right, dammit, that I'm not this holy old man. Your balloon is punctured regularly. It doesn't decrease, I don't think. And that people think I can talk about anything. Here we are doing it right now, you're feeding my compulsion. [laughter]

It's dangerous. This spiritual journey is really dangerous and especially if you're led to think of yourself as a spiritual master or teacher farther along the journey, you just said it, okay, there is a level of truth to it, but don't be enticed

Richard Rohr: by it, Richard. Don't be seduced by it. You've heard me say don't believe your PR too much, or don't identify with it. Then you're in trouble. You can't see the ways in which you're not a spiritual master at all.

Brie Stoner: I feel a little bit like I'm turning into a broken record, but I'm seeing themes that keep coming up for us where, in many ways, it seems the path of ascent is all about having power, and control, and attaining; whereas, the path of descent is more of that power-with-communion model that we keep wanting to live into, more of that Trinitarian flow.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Brie Stoner: So, I wonder, Richard, if you could help us understand how this tenet names that our process is about unknowing and forgiving the ways that we do want to cling to certainty to knowing, to power, to something to grab on to, to make sense of our world? We're much less comfortable moving into our failures, our wounds, those places that we are growing. We'd rather not. We'd rather consider ourselves as, "Nope, I'm good. I'm arrived enough. I don't need to look at that. I don't need to fail. I don't need to see that mistake." So, how does this tenet help us embrace unknowing and forgiving?

Richard Rohr: You used a good word in there: power. I don't think Jesus' message is about any one social issue—racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, consumerism. Pick any of the -isms that we're all caught up in. They're all undercut by a simple recognition that the ego wants power.

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: And once you see that your power needs are out of control, that they're not about truth, they're about control. People in the early stages say, "I've got to do this to speak my truth to power," not realizing that even in that that's dangerous because now you're the powerful one and the power person is properly humiliated by your speaking truth to them.

So, where I gain confidence to talk that way is in the three temptations of Jesus, that Jesus himself has to face. I think it's Matthew 3, isn't it? "He was led away by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." It's like a necessary being led. But isn't that interesting that even the Spirit seems to do, well, sometimes it says, "driven by the Spirit into the wilderness." Here, the Spirit drives us into necessary temptation. "For forty days, he fasted." In other words, he emptied himself out. That's path of descent again. "At the end of them, he was famished. The tempter approached him and said--" And this is the primary temptation, to make you doubt your divine ontological identity. "--if you are the Son of God—" All three start with, "If you are the Son of God [. . .], tell these stones to become bread."

Richard Rohr: So, for me, it's the temptation to seek the miraculous, the spectacular, the effective, the practical, what works, what immediately works, give the poor bread. "Then he took him to the holy city, set him on the parapet of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.'" So, the misuse of Scripture itself for diabolical purposes, that the devil can

quote Scripture. Wow. How can that be applied? And Jesus quotes Scripture back to him. “Then he took him—“ That’s religious power, the second. The third is political power. “The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their glory. ‘All these I will give you if you’ll only fall down and do me homage.’”

You pay a big price for wanting political power. You almost have to bow down before all kinds of idols of popularity, deceit, until we’re in the state we’re in today, where deceitful language even becomes acceptable on both sides. It’s an entire world of deceit. In other places, you know, Jesus calls Satan the father of lies.

That was probably more than you wanted for an answer, but power is the real issue. All of us have to discover whether we’re on the victimizer side or the victim side. The victim can easily rise to there’s a power you can’t question. I was victimized. So, you can walk around like a victim the rest of your life in charge, you can’t dare touch me because I’m a woman; I’m a Jew; I’m a Black person; I’m a gay, you understand, permanent victimhood used now for your own self-aggrandizement. This is the world today. Every one of the aggrieved groups has now found its way to use power.

So, I think this still deserves a lot of analysis, how that’s the foundational demon. Yeah. If you don’t have a path of descent spirituality made clear in your mind and heart, you’ll almost always fall into it.

I was telling Paul, he dropped in my office early this morning, you know, this Filipino couple bought me a smart TV. It’s taken me now four months to learn how to use it. Elias helped me use it last night. We watched this movie. Did you ever hear about the president of Uruguay, Pepe Mujica. They say he’s the poorest president in the world. He just does everything to model powerlessness because he isn’t a bona fide Christian or a bona fide capitalist, we pay no attention to him here in North America.

If you can see the movie, El Pepe, oh, I’m in love with him right now. He’s like, put Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, and St. Francis together. Here’s this sweet old man. He’s eighty now. He walks around his little village with his three-legged dog. The very name of the movie, it’s all in Spanish by the way with English subtitles, is El Pepe: A Supreme Life. You should see the crowds, the last years of his presidency, he’s now out of office, were just adoration because Latin America isn’t used to people who don’t abuse power.

I have always said the Catholic Church brought the gospel to Latin America, but it didn’t bring justice, any notion of justice. So, when you have a president of a

Richard Rohr: Latin American country, really not just talk justice, but live justice. Oh, by the way, he was in solitary confinement for ten years? Can you imagine?

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Richard Rohr: He talks about what that taught him. You’ve got to see the movie. You’d really love it. I’d love the whole staff to see it: Pepe Mujica. Pepe is short for Joseph, huh?

Brie Stoner: I’m not sure.

Richard Rohr: Oh. That's Italian. His father was Italian. His mother was Spanish. Yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Brie Stoner: What I appreciate about what you just said is that there's something about these experiences—darkness, failure, relapse, death, woundedness—every one of those experiences puts us in touch with powerlessness.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Brie Stoner: The transformative principle is not to stay identified in that place. We don't create an identification out of that, but that somehow touching in on that powerlessness and building on that last tenet that we just had in the last episode, it allows us to see the fallacy of the separate self—

Richard Rohr: Very good. Very good.

Brie Stoner: --because it's almost like the egoic separate self that maintains that strong boundary of like, "No, I've got this. I'm in control. I'm on top. I can keep achieving, and doing, and succeeding."

Those kind of end runs into the failure of our own systems, "salvation projects" as you can call them, Richard, is what helps us recover a connection of emptying, of powerlessness that actually draws us closer together. Because as I'm listening to you, Richard, each one of these experiences is really when you are in darkness, when failure happens, when you face death, when you are deeply wounded, when you are in the midst of those experiences, that's when community really comes in. That's when that mirroring happens when people draw around you.

Paul Swanson: I feel like community can really only happen when you recognize how deeply you need one another.

Brie Stoner: That's it.

Paul Swanson: You know what I mean? I think—

Brie Stoner: Yes. Thank you. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: --often it comes out of that desperate need that we are actually all in this together.

Brie Stoner: Richard, this is bringing up something that we talked a lot about last season, with the three different values that we focused on. How do you see those values of simplicity, devotion, and public virtue in relationship to the path of descent?

Richard Rohr: Wow. Well, the first thing that I'm thinking of, I don't know it's the right thing, is all three of those values that I'd like to see us develop at the CAC are movements out of individualism. The breaking of the shell of myself being enlightened, or myself being worthy, or we'd call it a sense of entitlement. I think we run that risk at the CAC because we've got a lot of patterns that are very good, and we're all patting ourselves on the back for it, but success in any form

is dangerous. It really is. We got a lot of people looking up to us and admiring us, trying to imitate us.

You know one of the most subtle ways of holding power is to hold another person, or etiology, or idea in contempt or unforgiveness. That's standing on the high horse. That's standing on the top of the mountain by "I will not release you from your inferior state. You are like this." And we, on the so-called left, which is where a lot of people place us, are very capable of that. But it's so well hidden. My main point is unforgiveness held onto is a power game. Can you think? Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Contempt of anything is a power game. I'm standing on my moral high ground who sees that until the middle of life? And to release the other person is, "Dang it. I don't want to release them. I want to hold them in their inferior state. You hurt me." Even a lot of trials we see anymore where I have to hold them accountable. Do you really have to? "Yes, I have to do it so nobody else has to suffer what I have suffered." Maybe that's your motivation, but I doubt if it's your whole motivation.

This is how deep working with the path of descent becomes. You just keep descending deeper and deeper into the forms of disguise.

Brie Stoner: That is such powerful teaching—

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: --just thinking about how easy it is to try to take a stance of moral superiority and—

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Yeah, I've done it too often.

Brie Stoner: --how slippery that is. But I'm thinking about the path of descent and what I'm going to call "the commodification of consumeristic contemplation," a mouthful. But here's what I mean by that: Richard, if our spirituality is just about getting, or having experiences, or having insights, rather than it costing us heartbreak, and change, and transformation, and moving us toward values that do support the whole, is it to be trusted?

Let me just be completely frank about it. It seems to me that in our time, there's this growing edge of having these mystical, drug-induced experiences as being somehow a very enlightened socially acceptable activity, and without slipping into that moral high ground, as you said, how do we discern what true transformation is?

Richard Rohr: Yeah, yeah.

Brie Stoner: Is it about having these experiences, and insights, and getting to these states or is it something else? Like, how do we know the fruits of the Spirit and how to discern what the path of transformation looks like?

Richard Rohr: That's great. That's what a spiritual director would ask. There's an ambiguous nature to virtue, and there's an ambiguous nature to vice. We were given the impression it wasn't

ambiguous. I talk about this in the new book on evil, that we thought it was always very clear. But you're making such a good point that you do need to experience something gratifying about virtue or why would you go there? Why would you keep moving in that direction?

So, you don't want to take away the true blessing that virtuous action is, but it's always your attachment to it, your manipulation of it, your use of it for your own advancement. That's what pollutes it and why even the Buddhists would say you have to act for the sake of the action, not for the sake of the response. If goodness is its own reward, well, I think we have every right to enjoy that reward. If vice is its own punishment, I think we need to suffer that punishment, not that God is directly punishing us but punished by our sins rather than for our sins. I hope I heard you correctly that you seem to be saying that there has to be something good about doing it right, which God expects us to appreciate.

Brie Stoner: But it's also difficult because it seems like because we're such a consumeristic culture that we turn it all about the good feelings, all about the good experiences—

Richard Rohr: There you go.

Brie Stoner: --the transcendent experiences—

Paul Swanson: The getting.

Brie Stoner: --the getting, the having. That's where I feel this growing social edge toward accepting like, "Oh, yeah, spiritual experiences as consonant with drug-induced experiences." I don't know. I struggle with that insofar as I hear you saying, though, that the path of descent is the inclusion of the things we otherwise would rather not do.

Richard Rohr: Sure. Sure.

Brie Stoner: I'd rather not look at the darkness and deal with failure, and relapse, and death, and accept woundedness. I'd rather not move into those uncomfortable places.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: I don't know if you've seen that too, Paul. It's very much a current in the current milieu to just look at the ecstatic state as the goal that, "Oh, yeah, just like have this really profound experience." I think the thing I'm wrestling with is, well, what does that experience yield? Is it just to continually come back and want to have another really induced state or—

Paul Swanson: One of my favorite lines from Carl Jung that we brought up here, he says somewhere, "Be wary of unearned wisdom." There's something about it that connects the path of descent for me of being able to follow the threads of where that despair and woundedness takes you and the lessons that can become more embodied through that experience of descent.

I'm wondering, Richard, I mean, do you think a good marker of any mystical experience would be, are the fruits of the Spirit present and sustained after that? Would that be a way to see whether, I mean, I don't want to get into nitpicking about what's authentic, mystical experience, and what's not but trying to think of a way to look at it from a healthy standpoint.

Richard Rohr: I think that's the only way at the end, the fruits of the Spirit as listed at the end of Galatians, is it 5, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. If you see that as the fruit of what you did and you were able to do it with that energy, and you engendered it in others, not perfectly every time, then you can probably say you were acting according to the Spirit. It has to be subtly interpreted, but there's almost no other way to know. But then it gets more naked than that, "Well, I don't need to be convinced every step of the way that I'm right.

Now, you perhaps know the quote I'm going to bring up because I've quoted it so much over the years, my friend, Thérèse of Lisieux, "Whoever is willing to serenely bear the trial—" serenely bear the trial "--of being displeasing to herself," she used the feminine, that person in that state of I'm not pleasing to myself right now. It's like Anthony de Mello said, "I'm an ass. You're an ass. What can you expect of an ass?" You're that empty. But then I'm not discouraged because I'm not perfect.

Richard Rohr: Now, she called that her Little Way. There's a statue of her as you enter the great cathedral where she's buried. No, no, she's buried down at the convent. She's holding up a book. Usually it's a man holding up a book, but here you have Thérèse inviting her into the great, and it's a new order of Christianity her new and Little Way that we come to God by burying our littleness with contentment. Yeah. What do you expect of a little nobody? Don't even use the word ecstatic, at least for me, I'm just talking to myself, it's just I want to wake up and live each day feeling happy and good because look what I accomplished yesterday! "I wrote a good daily meditation. A million people read it." [laughter] When I don't have that satisfaction, it's just, "Oh, God, I'm a big phony." I don't get any ecstasies anymore, but I need them less and less.

Well, the Jesuits would say neither needing desolation and—no, neither being attracted, you'd have to give me the word you were trained by a Jesuit, "desolation nor consolation."

Paul Swanson: Right.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. When neither of them attract you, oh, that's heroic. It's the little levels of feeling that we live off of, you know? Her Little Way was genius. It really was.

When I had that experience that I've talked to you about of chains flying in all direction in my novitiate. I'm nineteen or twenty, I don't know which, early in the novitiate or late in the novitiate. It was after reading this marvelous book called *A Retreat with Saint Therese*. That's why she's always been so important to me that I knew her Little Way—as she herself called it, she said, "It will never be popular," was the Gospel

Well, what else does Jesus teach when he starts his Sermon on the Mount with "Blessed are the poor in spirit"? This is not the prosperity gospel by any intimation. This is not a path of success or ascent, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," to know I'm a little shit. Really! God, what freedom that is. That's just good stuff.

Paul Swanson: I think that line is so potent that you just quoted from Thérèse of the willingness, even that word, the willingness being—

Richard Rohr: Whoever is willing.

Paul Swanson: --whoever is willing and how that does lead on the path of descent.

Richard Rohr: That's right. It's a willingness—

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. --to serenely bear the trial. It is a trial. I discovered that quote. It isn't in her autobiography. It's one of her letters to another nun. But in Scott Peck, is it

Richard Rohr: People of the Lie or is it The Road Less Traveled? But he says, "There's a lesser known Catholic nun in France," as a Protestant he probably had vaguely heard of her, he says, "This one line would solve most psychological problems that people have." Yeah. Because we're all fashioning a persona, trying to live up to it, try to live down to it, but to serenely bear the trial of being a little shit, I hope that isn't offending you. It's offending my mother in heaven. [laughter] She did correct me two different times where I used that word on early cassettes. I came home, and she said, "Dicky, I don't think you should use that word." I said, "Why not?" "You're going to lose fans." [laughter]

Paul Swanson: She's protecting her son's persona.

Richard Rohr: My mother wants her son to be successful.

Brie Stoner: That "serenely bearing the trial," I really, really appreciate that because I think not just in the consumeristic culture of how people tend to prefer these ecstatic, or positive, or happy feelings, or joyful feelings, but also in the ways that in contemplation we often turn non-duality or mystical union into a path of ascent. We turn it into something that we're trying to—

Richard Rohr: Path of ascent, and my good feelings are the proof of it.

Brie Stoner: Yes, or that I'm trying to achieve, or gain, or get to, as opposed to the simplicity of, "No, no, no, non-duality is to serenely bear the trial."

Richard Rohr: Every word is well chosen. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Right?

Brie Stoner: It's so good.

Richard Rohr: Did I finish it, "will be a pleasant place of shelter for Jesus"? It's perhaps a very feminine, sweet way of talking. But she wanted to be a place where Jesus could abide. She said only by serenely bearing the trial of being empty, the Buddhists would say, Jesus can live there, "will be a pleasant place of shelter for Jesus." It's magnificent.

Paul Swanson: Wow. Yeah. As we think about how do we practice this theme of the path of descent, what kind of invitation would you have for those listening to be willing to serenely bear the trials to be a shelter for Jesus?

Richard Rohr: You know what, don't speak up considering the character of American conversation today. Don't say the first thing that comes into your mind. I mean, I just see it in restaurants. Conversations are becoming louder, and louder, and more opinionated, and more hysterical. There's no silence. There's no emptiness in people. There is too much conviction. What's that wonderful

Richard Rohr: poetry code from Yeats, the Irish, where somebody—yes, you look it up—somebody lacks all conviction-- How could I forget?

Brie Stoner: The most passionate?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. I'll look it up.

Richard Rohr: She'll find it. It's just perfect. But I'm finding it harder to go to noisy bars and restaurants.

Brie Stoner: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Richard Rohr: Yeah. There it is. How did you find that so quick?

Brie Stoner: It's Google, Richard, the path of descent of information. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Read it one more time, please.

Brie Stoner: Okay. He says, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Ooh, I just went into my own path of descent with that one.

Richard Rohr: It's our world. Yeah. But you asked me something else, then I quote a poet. What did you ask me?

Paul Swanson: I was asking about how we practice that.

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes, how we practice this?

Paul Swanson: --your namings, taking a step back from the first thought.

Richard Rohr: To hold our convictions and our talkie-talkie about those a little more lightly. When everything is a knee-jerk reaction to appear to add something meaningful to the conversation and everything and everybody is trying to get in. You Fives and you Nines are the best at that. I have my two siblings who are Nines. You can just sit there and sort of let the rest of us hysterically state our case, and you don't need to be heard. One of my favorite Nines who lived with me in household, in fact he in some ways looked like you, Paul. I wonder whatever happened to John.

Paul Swanson: Handsome man. I'm sure.

Richard Rohr: Oh, very handsome. We had an all-day workshop with the whole community, and they were all supposed to copy down what they wanted New Jerusalem to be ten years from now. I was leading them through it, and it was moving very quickly, and John turned his in: "I hope

New Jerusalem never needs to be

Richard Rohr: important.” It was just like a big deflation. If you would have seen all the boxes of we’ve got to change the city, and change Church, and change the world. “I hope we never need to be important.”

Brie Stoner: Wow.

Richard Rohr: That’s, yeah, self-emptying.

Brie Stoner: I feel invited in what you just said, Richard, to live into that path of descent, that self-emptying with releasing stories, both of myself and of the people I interact with, that embrace of not knowing and unknowing as a practice of the path of descent to not live out of those storylines and identifications, both for myself and for the people that I interact with. Thank you.

Richard Rohr: Sure.

Paul Swanson: Thank you. Should we take a few questions?

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Let’s do it. Let’s do it.

Unknown Speaker: One of the most influential teachings for me at the Living School has been moving from a powerful God to a humble God, and Jim Finley’s invitation to move from a having mentality to the practice of receptivity. The daily practice of receptivity has been a profound shift in how I engage with relationship and with presence. What I find is that it’s easier to practice receptivity towards the gifts of life and relationship than it is to be receptive to darkness and failure, which is the path of descent that Richard teaches about. How do we learn to become receptive to our failures and diminishment without getting mired in despair? Thanks a lot.

Richard Rohr: It must be a necessary question. Yeah, because we don’t want to talk about a maudlin martyr complex spirituality. We have to distinguish from that—reveling in being a nobody. “I’m proud because I’m humble” kind of thing. [laughter] Maybe just saying it is enough, be careful. That would be one of those subtle disguises we keep talking about. I think I’ve reveled in being humble more than once. It takes a while to pull back from Richard, and to say, “You’re pretty proud of yourself that you don’t drive a Cadillac, but you still drive a quite comfortable car,” you know?

You said it so well that I think you’ve given the answer already. Be careful. Don’t go there. But you have to recognize the ease with which you do go there to stop yourself from going there. It’s all recognition. It’s all awareness, awareness,

Richard Rohr: awareness, catching yourself playing these subversive games. That is why we all say we need, at special times, spiritual directors, or confessors, or partners, or our real friends. Without it,

we can persist in delusion for many years of our life.

Brie Stoner: I'm thinking as well about how we were just talking about storylines. I think in the times where I've experienced darkness or wounds where I've slipped into despair, it's often because I've created a storyline. I've identified with it. I have allowed shame to say, "Oh, I am this mistake, or I am this wound. I am this thing that happened to me." That powerful image of Jesus healing people and saying, "You are not--" I think Jim Finley says this, "You are not what's been done to you. You're not your worst mistake."

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brie Stoner: Just to underline what you said, Richard, I think what helps me move out of that storyline of despair, or that identification, is community. It's love. It's the people who can say, "We're with you in this, but you are not this. You are not this thing that's happened, or you are not this moment, or this mistake or this failure."

Paul Swanson: Yet we tend to write a script for a movie that we play out as our life with the character already developed and the damage that can do to us. I just want to echo something that you said that is really landing for me. It's just the subtlety that we need to bring to how we interact with descent. It's a subtle art to know when we're leaning one way or another and not to just fully give over to that storyline or to what feels like complete failure but the subtlety to know that there's a seed of new life in there, too.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. You said it. I don't need to add. But you both introduced words that might be helpful to some people—story and storyline. It is very fashionable in retreat settings and therapeutic settings, to talk about it people need to tell their stories. They think just the telling of the story somehow makes it sacred. When in at least half the cases, it's a storyline that is lethal, or they over-identify with and to keep telling it. You know, once you verbally tell something—notice this after you go on a vacation, and you always tell about this or that—it's emblazoned in your memory that was what happened.

I understand this current language of life is about stories. Tell your story. But I'm saying, if that story doesn't evolve in its telling, if you're using the same adjectives, the same nouns, the same places, you're probably into it too much. It's probably self-serving. I offer that. I think it could help some people very much. Because just because it's a story that you told, don't let it be emblazoned on your very skin as "my story."

Unknown Speaker: Regarding the path of descent is the path of transformation, Richard, it seems that the path of descent, thus transformation, must include our acceptance of

Unknown Speaker: our own mortality, the phrase from twenty-seven-year old Holocaust victim, Etty Hillesum, where she talks of coming to terms with life, she says in part, "The reality of death has become a definite part of my life. My life has been extended by death, by accepting destruction as part of life, and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death, or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life, we enlarge and enrich it." I would

love to get your thoughts and comments. Thanks.

Brie Stoner: Wow.

Richard Rohr: I know you've already taught. I don't have anything I can improve on that. You perhaps have heard me say, I don't think you gave us your name, did you? I'm sorry.

Paul Swanson: No, I don't think so.

Richard Rohr: That one I felt for many years, one of the most significant books I ever read was Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*. It's a heavy read. But we were reading it back in the 60's, late 60's, was it? It won a Pulitzer Prize. He just comes at that from every angle and makes his case. I mean, he goes so far as to say every culture creates itself as an immortality project and every person does the same. Even the gravestone is a sign of that: This is who I was. This is what I stood for. We're all creating our memorial to immortalize ourselves.

But if you want to take a single book on your next vacation, it isn't depressing. It's just being kicked with reality. Oh, oh, how can you be so right? I think that's why a lot of the statues of our saints were shown, I don't like it, holding the skeleton head, the skull, live this life thing in the absolute realization that its other half is death and that nothing can be sustained. Nothing. Nothing. "Even the sun must die," as Eckhart Tolle said after 9/11. It's the great truth speaker, the great truth speaker. And so, all of the battles we're fighting, you do know that battle is going to change in three months or two months. Now we have a presidency in our country that literally changes the storyline every other day. We've all been held captive by it for four years now.

There's something demonic about this that one human being has the ability so that the evils that he created last Tuesday are forgettable, forgivable because there have been four evils since then. I don't have anything to compare it to. I really don't. Each evil is of a different character. So, we forget and forgive the total deceitful thing he said to us last Tuesday because there's this Tuesday's deceitful message. This is troublesome. Troublesome at a level that we better be afraid of.

Imagine if you're a teenager, you both have little kids. If they're growing up getting those half-heard messages that lying works, and it's all to enhance the ego, his ego in particular. I'm not trying to be political. I'm trying to be deeply

Richard Rohr: psychological and spiritual. How has this happened? The only thing I can conclude is that other people who are playing the same game can't see through his game because it's working for them, too, otherwise, they would see through it, it seems to me.

Brie Stoner: Only you, Richard, could in a path of descent sort of way recommend that we take a book about death on vacation—

Richard Rohr: On vacation. [laughter]

Brie Stoner: --so that we can have a long loving look at the real, lest we get swept up by vacation times. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: I do have one funny, quirky little recommendation.

Richard Rohr: Please.

Paul Swanson: I don't have many apps on my phone, but I have one called WeCroak. Five times a day it pops up a little message that says, "Don't forget, you're going to die one day," as a way to live with that memory of death.

Richard Rohr: Wow. You're going to die—

Paul Swanson: "One day." It's just a reminder that—

Richard Rohr: Oh, my goodness.

Paul Swanson: --death is a part of life.

Richard Rohr: Your little teacher.

Paul Swanson: Well, for me, it's really helpful because as a Nine, it spurs me back into like, this is life. It's not coming tomorrow. This is it right now.

Richard Rohr: You're going to die someday.

Paul Swanson: So, it's just a little helpful little app for those who are orientated that way.

Richard Rohr: See, you're holding the skull of the saints to live your life in the presence of death. It withdraws your false loyalty to all these things that you get so uptight about.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you all.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. This is hard stuff to talk about but thank you for staying in there. We're not trying to be more of it either. We're wanting to say some things that liberate you, liberate you for love, not depress you. So, if we haven't said it, I hope we haven't said it in a depressive way. [music] As I look at the other people in this room, they're not depressed at all. [laughter] All right. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thanks, Richard.

Brie Stoner: Thanks, Richard.

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

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