

**ANOTHER
NAME
FOR EVERY
THING**

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 5, Episode 3
Our Story of The Cosmic Egg

Brie Stoner: Hi, Paul.

Paul Swanson: Hey, Brie. How are you doing?

Brie Stoner: Doing good. On today's episode, it was three white bald guys and a Brie. [laughter]

Paul Swanson: It sounds like that's one of the fables from the Grimm Brothers that does not get talked about often. So, I'm glad you're raising it here. That the moral of that story is just...

Brie Stoner: It's deep?

Paul Swanson: ...next level.

Brie Stoner: No, but we were so thrilled to welcome Brian McLaren [into] our conversation today, as we explored the Our Story of the cosmic egg. For those of you who don't know who Brian McLaren is, first of all, shame on you; you should; but he is an author, a speaker. He was part of the emergent church movement. He's written a lot about post-modernity and is well-known for his series on a new kind of Christian. If you grew up evangelical like I did, Brian was the equivalent of a Richard Rohr for many of us: a voice in the wilderness who pointed the way to something bigger than the frames we were given.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I had that same experience where I remember my friends and I passing around A New Kind of Christian and having conversations, but it felt a little elicited for the culture that we are in, and he's been such a spotlight to kind of chart a new path forward. And I think, I mean his latest work, Faith After Doubt is just another kind of a great addition to the canon for those of us who are exploring the wider terrains that the kingdom of God as we seek to experience it.

Brie Stoner: And the CAC is certainly lucky to call him a faculty member now as well. So, you'll be hearing more from him. If you haven't heard his podcast series [Learning How to See] with the CAC, you definitely need to check it out.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. So good. So good. And what a treat to be in conversation today with Richard and Brian and you. The terrain we cover is so personal and yet universal in the ways that we embody and are formed in groups and organizations that we... And this conversation called Our Story, how did it hit you to kind of relive some of the Our Story that you were raised with and some of the challenges, and leaving, as a story to go to a bigger place?

Brie Stoner: It was so helpful, and hopefully you all will find it helpful as well to talk about the experience that you have when all of a sudden you can feel yourself no longer belonging to the Our Story that you're a part of. You know? We talked about whether you're sitting in the pew or the gray chair of the megachurch or whatever it is that you're part of, and all of a sudden you have that growing

Brie Stoner: sense of: oh, these shoes don't fit anymore. I don't know that I can be here with integrity anymore. I think I'm being called to a larger frame, and the courage that it takes to then, you know, sort of wander out into the wilderness of the unknown and the not yet.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. That courage is, it lies in wait with all of us, I think, and sometimes it comes from

a teacher like Richard, or Brian, or Barbara Holmes, who kind of show us something that helps us see beyond the horizon of our own experience. And sometimes it's just this own inkling of, if God is not bigger than this then this must be a very small God, and that God will often kind of come to perish or has to transform into something much bigger for us to actually live in a believable reality.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. And, you know, we spent some time talking about not just spiritual or religious Our Stories, but also politically as well, you know, the tendency to create us versus them cancel culture, you know, the role of contempt in, you know, in the formation of that type of group think and how contempt can become really damaging hatred. And, you know, whenever we turn Our Story into The Story, that's so problematic, and both Brian and Richard did an incredible job of pulling that out.

So, with that, we hope that you'll enjoy this deep, deep dive with Brian McLaren, and Richard Rohr, and Paul and I into the Our Story portion of what we're exploring on this season of Another Name for Every Thing.

So, I'm going [to]...why don't I open us in prayer. Loving one, weaver of meaning, I just... we ask that you pull out of us what is helpful, that you help us to make connections so that others can feel connected and connect more connection to you and to each other, to this world. Thank you for the opportunity to spend time talking about the meaning, the stories that we create, and we just ask for your guidance and wisdom in all the holy names of God. Amen.

So, we're going to kick off this conversation about Our Story, and we're so thrilled to have Brian McLaren with us, faculty member at the CAC. And I have to say I've been a super fan of yours, Brian, for a long time because I grew up evangelical and you were the voice in the desert for so many of us evangelicals who were exiting, you know, one particular story, one particular version of the Our Story of Christianity, and we're longing for something new. So, I just want to begin by saying welcome to Another Name for Every Thing.

Brian McLaren: Well, thanks. You know, I'm such an avid fan and listener of the podcast; I'm happy to be on it and happy to be with you three amazing people.

Brie Stoner: So to begin, we want to start this conversation of Our Story by naming what's healthy about the creation of Our Story because there is a healthy and necessary aspect to this part of the cosmic egg, it seems like, you know,

Brie Stoner: especially developmentally for kids growing up, for all of us, we need the boundaries of an Our Story in terms of laying the foundation of relationality for us, you know, or for children, you know, to understand ourselves in the context of something beyond the My Story, to understand ourselves in the context of relationships and community. So, I want to kick us off with this question. What groups do you each belong to that have really aided in your security and identity? Or maybe, what groups have you belonged to that have aided your security and identity?

Richard Rohr: Please start Brian; they've heard too much of me. [laughter] Go right ahead.

Brian McLaren: Oh, well, you know, Richard and I have come from very different backgrounds, but

we both come from very strong backgrounds that gave us a very, very deep sense of identity; and each in our own way, I think we've had to rethink a lot of the stories that we inherited. But I grew up in this very esoteric, little fundamentalist group. Some people would call it a sect called the Plymouth Brethren. And it's the same group that Garrison Keillor comes from if you've heard of him, and actually Jim Wallace came from this group too. If anyone has ever heard of the word dispensationalism, it was invented by the Plymouth Brethren: one of the worst ideas in Christian history my group contributed. The rapture was one of our unique contributions to the Christian community.

Again, you're welcome. [laughter] I'm off of that. But you know, it was a group that took its identity super-seriously. We thought we were pretty much the only Christians who had it right. And as a result, we really took things, took ourselves very seriously. We also took the Bible very seriously. So, that was my original group. Gradually, I tried to find larger groups that had a little more breathing room, and so for me, moving from the Plymouth Brethren to the evangelical movement was a movement toward liberation. Like to me, evangelicals had a whole lot more freedom than my original background. And then, I became part of the charismatic movement and the Jesus movement in the 1970s. Again, it was a portal into some more freedom, and in many ways as I embraced more and more freedom, some of the people from my earlier groups felt less and less comfortable with me.

But a big part of all of our lives, I think, is figuring out how do we love and include the people maybe who don't want to include us anymore because they think we're a little bit dangerous. But, yeah, those would be some of the groups. I had stints in what some people call Reformed Protestantism, where I was introduced to that, and in each case, I was attracted by something good, and in each case, I think I eventually found the limits of what that, that little, what I would call a "small we" or a "small us" allowed me to experience, and talk about, and think about.

Brie Stoner: Hmm. Richard, how about you?

Richard Rohr: Okay. Well, as Brian said, there's a lot of parallels. Certainly, my beginnings as a German Catholic in the 1940s and '50s in Kansas tells it all. I began with

Richard Rohr: completely traditional values. There wasn't an anger about them, however—and I mean that sincerely—there wasn't a...it was just, this is the way it is. Isn't everybody this way? And we only felt sorry for people who weren't. So, it was sort of patronizing toward the rest of the world, but not cruel or angry, which is very different than we have now. Then of course, joining the Franciscans at such a young age, took my first vows at nineteen and lived totally in that world for thirteen years of education, formation. And that became the movement period from my traditionalism to Vatican II in the early sixties and a very progressive notion of Catholic Christianity.

But the wonderful thing is, I was educated into it. It wasn't just feelings, you know, it wasn't just, yeah. And if there was a critique of the old Catholic Church, it was a rational critique. It was a usual critique of inconsistency. How, why did we say this if we believe that kind of thing? So, that was my second major group: Family Friars.

Then the two major worlds I've lived in: this year we celebrate in November the fiftieth anniversary of the event that started the New Jerusalem Community. And that was very charismatic just as Brian... We were sort of considered black sheep by the charismatic headship, which was up in Michigan, and they would send down letters to us [about] how heretical we were and that I better conform. And the two big issues—this is already the late seventies—was that I had women in leadership and...

Brie Stoner: Heaven forbid! How radical of you.

Richard Rohr: ...and what was the other thing? I can't remember, must have repressed it. Women and leadership. [laughter] Darn, this is my short-term memory; but there were two things that made us unacceptable. So, I was invited once to talk at a conference in Calvinist Grand Rapids, where Brie now lives, and Holland, Michigan. Is that the same thing? That's a little ways away.

Brie Stoner: It's only forty minutes away, but it's close enough to feel very oppressively close.

Richard Rohr: [laughter] Were you at any of those conferences, Brian? Could we both have been very young men then? No.

Brian McLaren: I don't think, yeah, I don't think so.

Richard Rohr: No. And there was a great birth of the community of communities, fourteen communities nationally who had all developed what we call these living lifestyle communities. Anyway, oh, I'm backtracking, aren't I? Now I'm supposed to be talking about the New Jerusalem, my specific one, and then coming here, now into our thirty-third year of the Center for Action and Contemplation, where this has been the context, the forum that constantly made me keep reading, keep studying; I'm speaking internationally all this time. And so I always had to keep

Richard Rohr: studying because I was going to be standing in front of a crowd and I had to know what I was talking about. You know? It was a little, did I think what a wonderful symbiotic relationship that was. So, those were the different belonging systems, communities that have formed me.

Brie Stoner: As I listen to both of you kind of give us a drive-by of your many Our Groups that you've belonged to, it strikes me like what a human tendency this is to just kind of circle the wagons up around an Our [Story]. And, you know, in the last episode, I commented that I'm a recovering, self-righteous, precious, contemplative asshole. And what I mean by that is the growing recognition that even we here at the CAC and our broader constituency have just as much of that tendency to create an unhealthy, very boundaried, very elitist Our Story. So, my question is this to both of you, how do we find healthy relationality of belonging? How do we find a healthy Our, while not turning it into another map or arrogant, exclusive Our?

Brian McLaren: Yeah. I'd love to offer something on that, Brie.

Richard Rohr: Please, please.

Brian McLaren: I think one of the great tendencies of the Our Story is that we then claim to be The Story....

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's right.

Brian McLaren: ...and we take ourselves seriously, which we need to do. A family needs to take itself seriously. It's been fun for me this winter. Two of my kids with their kids have been quarantining with us down here in Florida, and I'm watching how each, my son and my daughter with their children, are building this beautiful family identity. Right? That's important, that to be a, you know, to be a member of this family means something, and gives all these wonderful ideals. But when we project that out as if that's the story that defines all other stories, we then... it has a harmful effect on others, but it has a harmful effect on us. It makes us think that we are normative. And as you said, Richard, it can be very naïve and very innocent. We feel sorry for the other people.

Richard Rohr: You do.

Brian McLaren: You just don't see what's so obvious to us. Yeah, so I think that's one of the great dangers and that sort of implies a healing for this. If we always remember there's a story bigger than ours that our little group is a part of, and that gives us validity, but that we don't fully understand; we don't fully define; we reach for it; we grasp toward it. I'll tell you a way I've been trying to express this lately is, I talked to my fellow progressive Christian friends and my contemplative Christian friends, and I say, "we have to embody, and create, and develop, and strengthen a vital Christian wing of a much larger spiritual movement." Our

Brian McLaren: work is important, but there's something even bigger than our group that is really important too.

Richard Rohr: That's right. It's an art form to know how to keep yourself situated and proud and educated in the group you're a part of without idolizing it or making it the reference point. I'll tell you what you just explained Brian is one of the main reasons I was attracted to this paradigm of the cosmic egg: the confusion, the constant confusion of Our Story for The Story. I've been even strengthened in that in all these months we've had with COVID of quarantine. I was given Netflix and I made the mistake of starting to watch some of these series, and one was a history of Europe, which I couldn't stop watching. And more recently, a history of England, which I couldn't stop watching. And you just see, that that's what both groups did, which led to the First World War, the Second World War, just immense illusion and violence, when you really take your country or your continent, in the case of Europe, that—and you know what I'm sure all of you know, but it hit me as I looked at it—by the time of the First World War, all of the families, the royal families of Europe, were totally, and this is not a metaphorical use, an incestuous single family.

They were all related to one another. They just kept intermarrying, intermarrying, and this is so humiliating for the English to admit, you know, that they're all German. [laughter] Boy, it...and we are the white, privileged, elite group that got smaller and smaller. And that's the real point I want to make: once you play that game, your explanation for reality gets smaller and smaller. So, the czar of Russia and the king of England are first cousins. And in your mind, in my mind, we think of Russia and England as two completely different worlds. Not

really. Yeah. So...yeah.

Paul Swanson: I so appreciate that, Richard. And I'm also glad to hear that your Netflix has moved beyond The Borgias [laughter]; you started to dip into some...

Brie Stoner: I was going to ask. [laughter]

Richard Rohr: Why did I tell that? Now you've broadcasted it. [laughter]

Brie Stoner: Oh, yes.

Richard Rohr: Well, that was my ability to, or my attempt to relativize the Roman Catholic. And of course, The Borgias does it in spades. But it's great theater and great costuming and...

Paul Swanson: Yeah, for sure, for sure. And I mean, I think what you just shared too, I think about how... I remember reading, I think it was John O'Donohue who talked about how every relationship is a foreign country, and so, when you visit another relationship you see their customs and culture, and you have to step into it that, with that kind of open-mindedness. I think the same is true for the Our Stories within the different spiritual circles that we've all talked about, and

Paul Swanson: the ways that there's goodness there and things to learn from, but it doesn't mean that you, the growing edge, I think it always invites more curiosity and adaptation. And I want to just kind of dip back into some of the Our Story piece from your book, Richard, The Wisdom Pattern. You talk about the anxiety of developing a personal self when you're being pacified, when you're entrenched inside of an Our Story. One, can I ask you to further unpack that because I feel like that's a very potent idea? And then after that, how can a person wrestle with the development of personal self within groups of belonging within the Our Story? How do we do both?

Richard Rohr: Boy, that's good. Yeah, when you first discover that there is such a thing as My Story, you first discover your own inner life, your inner world, it is so exciting that you overly rebel against Our Story. And on the other side, when you grow up as I did with an intense Our Story, you don't need a The Story. In fact, it's considered liberal thinking, that word liberal is used in so many ways. But I remember when I was studying theology in the late sixties in Dayton, Ohio, and one of the more progressive Franciscans brought in a whole team to lead the entire student body and the faculty through what we called, what did we call it? Sensitivity training, sensitivity training. Oh my gosh, where we were bearing our souls and the faculty were bearing their souls to us. And the word got back to the headquarters in Cincinnati and we were told, "stop this; it's going to tear you apart."

And it, for six months, it did, to suddenly where Our Story was the total agenda, being a Franciscan. And in the middle of that, we all discovered sensitivity training, intense sensitivity training. Some guys never recovered from it and a good number left because they discovered an "I" and realized The Our wasn't adequate to the "I," if I can put it that way. Now, I do think some of them left unfortunately because they didn't cook with it long enough to see that, in fact, we used to say in those years, "the best guys are leaving, the best guys are leaving." Guys like me, we stayed. But what we meant by that is, those guys who really came to intense self-awareness became very rebellious against the Franciscan umbrella.

It wasn't big enough to hold them, but that was a short-term response in most cases, not in all. Does that answer at all your question?

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Yeah. That was...you got to the heart of it, of that tension between the "I" and the "Our" that was occurring. And that the discovery of the "I" was actually the reason why some of your fellow Franciscans were deciding to leave.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: Brian, did you have any experience like with that within the evangelical circles you ran in and the way that that's blossomed in different arenas?

Brian McLaren: Oh, my gosh. And Brie, I know you would have stories of this too. There are just so many examples of it. There's a huge conversation happening among post-evangelicals or ex-evangelicals now about purity culture, which created a set of sexual norms that gave so many people shame and self-hatred about their own sexuality, that, you know, people now twenty, thirty years, forty years later find themselves deeply wounded, and they realized that decades of their lives have been deformed by this. And sexuality is one of those dimensions of our lives that doesn't easily just go away if the Our Story tells us it should.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, but you know, actually I just came across a quote recently from Thomas Merton, and Paul, I think it perfectly captures what you're describing. Can I just read it real quickly? It's from a little-known work of Merton's, an essay called "Christianity and Totalitarianism" in 1960, here are just two paragraphs. "A mass movement..."

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Brian McLaren: And when he says mass movement, I think he means a massified movement.

Richard Rohr: Massified.

Brian McLaren: The kind of thing that swept people into the Capitol on January 6, 2021. "A mass movement readily exploits the discontent and frustration of large segments of the population which for some reason or other cannot face the responsibility of being persons and standing on their own feet. But give these persons a movement to join, a cause to defend, and they will go to any extreme, stop at no crime, intoxicated as they are by the slogans that give them a pseudo-religious sense of transcending their own limitations." Oh my gosh.

Brie Stoner: Damn.

Richard Rohr: Wow. Does that say it? Does that say it? 1960?

Brie Stoner: Wow.

Richard Rohr: That man was such a seer. Go ahead, Brian.

Brian McLaren: You can, well, you can see why, and, you know, I think here at [the] Center for Action and Contemplation, the reason we want to keep action together with contemplation is that

there's a sense that if contemplation involves to one degree facing my own individual story and coming to encounter God in my own story, in my own experience, God disguised as my life, that then gives me some leverage point to not be, just be swept into the Our Stories of racism, or nationalism, or capitalism, or communism, or whatever it is. And it gives us this leg to stand on, this something to not just be swept into that massification, you know?

Brie Stoner: Yeah. And I love that you're bringing up the central tension point of action and contemplation, which for me only works in a dynamic ontology of becoming...

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Brie Stoner: ...a recognition that My Story and Our Story are unfinished.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Brie Stoner: Therefore, if the My Story is not represented or seen by the dominant Our Story, then I have a role to play in animating the recognition that there's more. You know, you brought up purity culture and I was like, "no, Brian, I don't, I don't recall purity culture and evangelical movement at all. It's so...it was so damaging. It is still so damaging and, you know, to none as much as women. We have borne the brunt long enough of needing to be the vessels of "imperfection and fallenness" in this frame that we've carried out in Christianity. So, you know, as a woman, I can relate to the experience growing up in that evangelical Our where I wasn't represented. In fact, I was scapegoated. And so, as we recognize that this is the harmony of the cosmic egg, right? It's like the opportunity of seeing the cosmic egg as an unfolding symphony that we all have a part in playing, because when the My Story can harmonically influence the Our Story to become broader and include all my stories, now that's when the music gets juicy.

Brian McLaren: Mm, mm. And this [is a] huge part of the battle, isn't it? The fact, and it's why the word story is so good. My Story isn't over; Our Story isn't over. And there's a group of people who are very happy with the current status of Our Story, and they want to keep it just the way it is because it gives them power, and it gives them privilege, and it gives them justifications that they like, and they're comfortable with it. But then we say, no, you know, it's not finished yet. And, you know, interestingly, when you stop a story, you kill it.

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Wow. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: But the people who think they're defending it by stopping it are actually killing it.

Brie Stoner: That's right.

Brian McLaren: and this invitation, and I love this dynamism then between My Story and Our Story. And of course, then, you know, we always remember that there's a larger, much larger reality.

Brie Stoner: Right.

Brian McLaren: It's what I think Barbara, Dr. Barbara Holmes captures perfectly when she writes a book

called Race in the Cosmos. It's a way of saying that Our Story of race, if it makes itself the ultimate reality, we're in deep trouble; we need to relativize it by a much larger story.

Richard Rohr: Perfect. You know, if I can go the other direction with our paradigm of the three domes of meaning, by the [time the] Vatican Council ended in '66, what it had done was, in a significant way, give new wording to The Story for Catholics, you know. Oh my gosh, this works; this makes sense, you know, good scripture, good understanding of tradition, good use of history and philosophy. And so us young ones just became thrilled with it. But '68, two years later, is the single year when more priests and nuns left the priesthood and the convent than any year of history—1968. They just flooded out of vows because the old paradigm, which had absolutized itself, didn't make sense anymore if you didn't get the new, real story, if the new language, and some ran back to the Latin mass, which continues to this day, some run back to the worship of the papacy, and of course, they're really falling apart now, the Pope being Pope Francis. He doesn't fit; he doesn't fit the paradigm. But you can move it from either side: the Our Story by a new The Story by a new My Story. And I know you know that.

Paul Swanson: And we have this example I think too of Jesus representing this furthering, this becoming like... I think of, you know, when John the Baptist, when his followers come to Jesus and say, "Are you the one, are you the one that we're waiting for?" Because he seemed to go beyond the perceived boundaries of what that group was doing, and it wasn't that he was denying what they had brought and what they were bringing into the world; it's just that Jesus's participation, his story was continuing to enlarge as his ministry and life went on. And I think that seems to be part of how this sense of becoming plays out in the cosmic egg is: that there's no final line to the story that we can see in our own writing of our lives and writing in the groups that we're in.

How have you experienced this for yourselves in this? Can you pinpoint any moments where you recognize, like you were part of a group that was helpful and healthy for you, but you recognize the sense of, for My Story to continue to unfold in the sense of the Spirit's leading, and maybe even to enlarge an Our Story? Because I think, that when I think of some of the folks listening, they are circling in Our Stories that are not helpful, that they're trying to grow out of.

Brie Stoner: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. (affirmative)

Paul Swanson: What are ways that you all could help folks kind of find pathways to step in love and the risk of that potentiality of what can happen when they step further into a story becoming into My Story and Our Story and The Story?

Brie Stoner: Beautiful.

Brian McLaren: Well, I'll offer something that comes to mind from the brilliant Parker Palmer. Parker talks about a four-stage process of a movement being born, and the first stage—well, maybe I should say that the zero stage in which the first stage arises—is a stage that you just described, Paul, where people feel like I'm part of a group that expects me to tell a story that doesn't make sense to me anymore. But if I say that I'll be kicked out, or I'll be looked down upon, or I'll be fired, or I'll be edged out, so I keep quiet about my misgivings. I just wrote

a book called Faith After Doubt, which is about, that's part of what doubt is: it's being in a group where you say, "I'm supposed to go along with this, but something doesn't sit right."

So the first stage, Parker Palmer says, is divided no more, and what he means by that is I'm dividing myself: the face that I showed in my group and the face that I kept private to myself. And when something in us says, "I'm not going to be divided anymore," that's when the process begins. There's a problem here: I'm not going; I'm not going to play along. Second stage involves going public. Somebody goes public and says, "excuse me, but I'm not comfortable with this; excuse me, but I don't think that's the whole story." And as soon as they do, that leads to the third stage: other people start coming together and saying, "I thought I was the only person who didn't see it that way. I thought I was the only one who didn't fit in." And he says, they establish communities of congruence, where people say, "oh, I'm not the only one." And in those communities, critical conversations come. They hassle things out and wrestle things out, and then that leads to what he calls alternative rewards because he says when those communities of convergence develop, they'll be punished by the existing power structures. So, they have to create alternative rewards, where people say we have a right to exist; we're going to take care of each other because the larger group telling the old Our Story is no longer going to take care of us. Anyhow, that to me is a way that... and I've sure seen that play out in my own life.

Brie Stoner: That is such a helpful frame, Brian, just even describing the steps. I'm sure so many of our listeners can relate to one or all of them. The moment when you're sitting in the pew or the gray chair, you know, Mars Hill Bible Church, Rob Bell's old church here in West Michigan used to call them the gray chairs. And I remember sitting in the gray chair and having this moment where I finally allowed myself to authentically recognize that I wasn't being authentic and being there anymore. That by showing up, I was going against the grain of a deeper longing, [music begins] and there was a dissonance happening. I was out of tune with my own conscience and where I think the spirit was wanting to take me. Ah, I bet there are so many who are listening, who remember or recall that feeling.

Richard Rohr: It's a moment that—well, it's more than a moment—but that demands so much courage, and good eldering or spiritual direction, or at least one good teacher. And what you have to learn in that period is—and it takes some time: I'm talking about years, not weeks or months—to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. I think that's what I was doing much of the sixties and seventies,

Richard Rohr: now, what do I really need to hold on to as essential Christianity, as essential Catholicism, essential Franciscanism? And boy, you only learn to do it right by doing it wrong a number of times, particularly from the pulpit where you make public your inner thoughts. I'm sure you did that, Brian, where...

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: And good friends or good teachers would say, "Richard, you're right, but you're coming across a little angry or you're coming across a little like egocentric," and I'm sure I still do. But, boy, if you don't have an ability to be guided through that period, you will not know how to get out of exile back into what I call "reorder" in that Wisdom book. It's...boy, and few people have it. So what they do is they run back to a reassertion of, because they can

keep all their friends, they can repeat the clichés of their early seminary professors and their blessing. The advantage I had was there was a huge flux created by Vatican II...

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: ...which allowed me to just float and the momentum was on our side. I don't think evangelicals enjoy that today. You look so much like heretics.

Brie Stoner: [laughter] Thanks Richard.

Richard Rohr: Whereas in the Catholic world in the last years, there was always a sense, well, these guys might be right. They proved themselves to be, in the sixties, at least half right. Half right. So I don't think you enjoy that spaciousness.

Brie Stoner: No, it's uncomfortable. It's really uncomfortable to be in, the exile, the exile of unknowing.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Very good.

Brie Stoner: I want to talk about that a little bit. Let's hang out in the wilderness of the exile for a minute because, you know, it takes a tremendous amount of courage and a trust fall in trusting your own experience to take you into a larger Our [Story]. And you know, for many of us, and I'm going to direct this question to you, Brian, for many of us who grew up as good evangies, you know, we experienced that exile. And in many of us, as we recognize that there was this dissonance between our lived experience of a more spacious and mysterious God, the desire to be able to hold paradox, and for something that was deeper than the quippy cliché Christianity we were getting on a Sunday morning, we experienced a profoundly devastating exit from, you know, we'll call it Eden, when we suddenly ate from the tree of knowledge and discovered that the categories of belonging were too constricting and the false binaries.

And I don't know, being a woman in general made you like not really compatible with evangelicals. [laughter] So, we wandered in this wilderness feeling like,

Brie Stoner: well, you know, I guess I don't belong to that Our Story anymore. And that dislocation was profound and, you know, required a lot of grieving the loss of the connection to that Our Story, and, you know, wandering around in that desert. I'd love to hear about the process of not, you know, leaving one Our Story, but not finding a larger one yet, and being in that space of unknowing for those listeners who might be there. And then my second question, follow-up to that, would be: how do we relate back to those who are still in that former Our Story, you know, especially family members who maybe have remained inside that tight, tighter circle of belonging, and they're "shouting their bad advice," to quote Mary Oliver, at us. How do we relate to them with grace without needing to explain ourselves all the time?

Brian McLaren: Mm. What, great questions, Brie. It's so interesting, when you just asked me that question about the unknowing, just a new insight about my own life and my own story just hit me. And here's what it is: because of my very strict and very passionate background, when I began to feel that The Story wasn't working, I don't think I ever for one second knew that I was allowed to say, "I don't know," you know. There was no CAC telling me that there was something called liminal space and there was something called the path of descent, and

that unknowing was a part of the journey that I should expect. Nobody was telling me that. So, here's what I did instead. I fixed one more detail. In other words, I couldn't just say, I don't know. I could say, well, I almost know; I just have to make this slight tweak and slight adjustment.

Brian McLaren: And if I could go back and give myself a gift, it would be to say, "you're allowed to say, I don't know;" "you're allowed to..." In fact, I love the term you used earlier, a trust fall. I'm allowed to fall back into God's knowing and for me to say, "I don't know." I tell a story where this hit me for the first time. On my days off, I was a pastor and it's hard to go through this kind of rethinking when you're getting paid to keep the old, Our Story alive. And so, on my days off, I just felt I had to get away, and I would go hike the C&O Canal near Washington, D.C. Anybody from that area knows what a beautiful place it is. And I'm walking along one day, and I remembered a verse that I'd memorized as a kid, which is: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding." And, at that moment, for some reason, it just was like a flick in the head, I realized trusting in the Lord is different than trusting in my own understanding of the Lord. And when I could say, "God, I'm going to doubt my beliefs about you, and I'm trusting you to help me get through this." I mean, that might seem so obvious to some people, but for me, it was like this little crack in this structure that opened up. Does that address what you're asking, Brie?

Brie Stoner: Yeah, that resonates so deeply, the capacity to stabilize in the discomfort of not knowing seems to be so central to the contemplative practice, right?

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Brie Stoner: It's letting go letting go of my constructs, my thoughts, my feelings, and learning how to almost somatically get accustomed to that trust fall. And you know, to follow up, I wonder what, what is the most gracious way for us to trust fall with love in our relationships to others, maybe those who are still in that more constricted Our Story.

Brian McLaren: Yeah. And this is really, really tough because then we start asking questions, and then people start being nervous about us, and they start worrying we're going to hell, and they start worrying, and words like apostate and heretic and all these, you know—liberal, the worst word of all—start being thrown around. And it really is a socially difficult, and emotionally and relationally difficult road to walk. And I can only offer a couple of very specific things that have helped me. One of them is: I call it the courage to differ graciously, and it involves five words. I always use these five words because they've served me well and they're honest: "Wow, I see that differently." And so, you know, you're home at Thanksgiving and somebody says, "well, all those people are going to hell anyway." And then you say, you know—if you're silent, you feel dirty and you feel complicit—and if you say, "Uncle Fred, you're such an arrogant, bigoted fundamentalist," that Thanksgiving dinner doesn't go so well.

So, I find by saying "wow," I say "wow" because it's my way of saying, I have emotion about this; I care about this, instead of "you are wrong," "I see that differently." And I have the courage to differ graciously. Now, usually when you say that the person says, "well, what do you mean?" And what I found, if at all possible, I say to them, "I'd rather not get into it right now, Uncle Fred. I just want you to know, I used to see it that way; I really see it differently now. If you want to talk about it, let's talk about it some other time, you know, in private."

The reason I suggest that is at the moment you can say to somebody, “I differ from you, but I don’t need to convince you I’m right,” you’re giving them a phenomenal gift...

Brie Stoner: Wow.

Brian McLaren: ...and the gift is, I love you and we don’t have to agree. I have the security to be different. And in a sense, what I’m doing is I’m violating the rules of Our Story that say, we all have to agree on this. And in a way, I might even be stepping into a larger story that allows us to disagree, but still be part of something where we love each other. So that’s a little, I mean, it might seem like a gimmick, but it actually has worked and seems to me to be an honest and fair way to do that.

Richard Rohr: I totally agree. Thank you. Thank you. That’s all I can say though. The form I’ve usually used is—I try to say it in as kind of voice as I can: I’m going to have to think about that. I’m going to have to think about that.

Brie Stoner: Do you remember Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams at the conference at the CAC? She had this brilliant way of saying, you know, “I might need to complicate that for you.”

Richard Rohr: Oh yeah. Yes.

Brie Stoner: She would lay out this brilliant, you know, but...

Richard Rohr: Complicate.

Brie Stoner: ...but so helpful, both of you. That’s such a helpful way to be, to honor the authentic, you know, need to speak up in the moment, the need to honor My Story by saying, you know, “I don’t see it that way,” but to do so with grace. Wow. That’s beautiful.

Brian McLaren: Oh, well, one other thing I think that is helpful in those situations is to decide, you know, that beautiful old song derived from Ecclesiastes, “For everything, there’s a time and season.” And sometimes what people need is not a theological argument, they need reassurance. So for me, growing up in my background, my parents would say, “you aren’t changing your view on homosexuality, are you?” And I’d say, “Oh, don’t worry, Mom; don’t worry, Dad; I love Jesus, and I love my neighbor, and that’s what really counts. They weren’t ready to handle a big argument, right? But I could give them the reassurance that they needed and that they were ready for. But there are other times where the argument needs to happen or at least the story of how I came to see it differently needs to be told. But, yeah, sometimes folks just need reassurance.

Paul Swanson: That’s so, so helpful. I think too about, you know, Richard, I think about the phrase that you’re known for of “the edge of the inside,” to take this to kind of what we see in the natural world of this metaphor that has given me a lot of life is of ecotones, where field and marsh meet, where these two different ecosystems meet, there’s the greatest exchange of life. And so I think that it’s useful in this for me, when I think about whether it’s differing views, the way that both, well, all three of you have shared, there’s an opening for an exchange of life to happen through those responses. And also, I think that metaphor also works when, if you are kind of moving, like letting go of one story or ending a chapter of one story and move into another, there’s often this great exchange of life that occurs in your own My Story

that propels you to expand into the Our Story.

And so I want to transition here just a touch because the one thing that has become clear to me in listening to the My Story and the Our Story of historically marginalized people, it has shown the poverty of particularly the Our Story that I was raised with, and kind of has invited my participation because the Our Story that I was raised with was more, was comforting to the My Story. And so I'm wondering how can the limitations of one's identities, someone in particular who looks like me, a white, straight male, can be included and transcended to expand beyond the Our Story that I've been raised with and that kind of coddles my comfort. How do we expand that?

Brian McLaren: Yeah. You know, Paul, a quote immediately comes to mind. I won't get this perfectly, but it's by a First Nations leader in Canada named Georges Erasmus. And he says, "where there is no common memory, there can be no community." And what he's saying is, you know, if the white people who came to Canada or the United States tell one story of their history, and the native peoples who experienced those same years in a very different way, their story is never heard, then there can't be any community; we're living by different stories. And it seems to me that's one of the—to use that image of an ecotone—you go to the "edge of the inside" and you say, I want to hear the story of my neighbor who's been brought up with a different Our Story, and now I want to learn, and I want to experience empathy, and I want to hear the part of this story that I've never heard before. So, there's this deep listening and this hospitality to one another's stories that then begins the process of building an Our Story that's more inclusive. It's not colonizing; it's not saying shut up with your story and accept ours. It's saying the story we have to tell has to be based on common memory and let's hear it. I mean, look, all of us who've been married, we deal with that. Our spouses, you know, "You said this!" "No, I didn't!" "You forgot this." "No, I didn't!" We have those arguments because we're trying to come up with a common memory so that we can live together.
[laughter]

Richard Rohr: That's so helpful.

Brie Stoner: Brian, my common memory whenever I've been in an argument with a partner is always my common memory. It's...

[laughter]

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes. You know what we're enjoying and strikes me is, let me call in a generic way, postmodernism, and I do mean enjoying, that my generation was not exposed to that at all. And so, it thought it could understand text outside of context. That's what it comes down to. And you could, maybe, it's oversimplified, but you could describe postmodernism as discovering the necessity of context; and once that flooded into the world, I mean, the flood gates are still opening. How dare you give me a My Story without an Our Story. And that is, you know, a veil parting from the eyes when you finally get that in a very serious way. And I think it's what makes us get so impatient with people who keep—this is an unkind way, but—keep repeating clichés. And you just want to say, "oh, I can't go back to that. I know what you're trying to say because I was there once; I really was there once." And it makes it very hard if you don't have some kind of, a little bit of kindness or humility, which I often haven't, you don't know how to do it. Yeah. It's constantly a learning. And as you've said,

those of you who've been married, you must learn it right there for the marriage to survive.

Brie Stoner: We've mastered it already [laughter] this thing you call listening and humility. But, you know, this is reminding me of the broader, critical, cultural shift that's happening right now around needing to have humility and listening, particularly as white people. Right? Because the recognition of white supremacy as being

Brie Stoner: the foundations of our culture, and having existed as the dominant Our Story means that we have to be, first of all, willing to recognize that we turned the Our Story, the white-supremacy-dominant Our Story into The Story. And, you know, I just want to touch on this: the colonial need to dominate and determine, and, you know, put boundaries and borders and maps, and say "this is the architecture of reality. I have established it." You know, I think there's a necessary healthy, and we're, you know...I'm glad you brought up postmodernism Richard. I was hoping you were going to go there because I have so many things I want to talk about with that. But there's a healthy critique of postmodernism...

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Brie Stoner: ...of bringing in the necessary questioning of those maps of meaning and where they hail from. To say, you know, the ways in which we have created hierarchies of paradigms of power over, that's problematic.

Brian McLaren: You know that word post-modern has so many debates, and as you know, I've written books about this, and I've been involved in so many of these debates; but I remember being in the backseat of a car on a long drive with African theologian named Mabilia Kenzo, and he said to me, "Brian, you have to remember post-modern is post-colonial."

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: And then another friend of mine, Alan Roxburgh said to me once, "Brian, you underestimate...you overestimate philosophical history, and you underestimate social history." And what he meant by that...and then he said, "post-modern is post-Holocaust." And so, if you say what happens to the white people who watched their most advanced exemplary country, Germany, slide into Nazism and commit the Holocaust; and then you say something is wrong with Our Story; and then you watch colonialism, and then the stories of the people who have been colonized begin to come out; and you say, something's wrong with the way we're doing civilization.

Those kinds of second thoughts are really the challenge to both Our Story and the sense that Our Story was The Story. And in some ways, that's where this paradigm of the cosmic egg can be liberating in a really positive way, because what...first, by calling these things stories rather than institutions or ideologies, it says they're not finished yet, and they're going to get worse, or they're going to get better. And second, by saying there's not just one and there's not just two, but there are many levels of these stories. It helps us. I think it gives us liberation to say our stories are malleable. Frankly, I think that's what Jesus was doing in the Sermon on the Mount when he says "you have heard it said, but..." And he said, I don't, "I didn't come to destroy the law and the prophets." I'm not

Brian McLaren: coming to destroy the old paradigm and the old stories; I'm coming to fulfill them. They weren't finished yet. There's more work to be done and I'm extending those stories into the future. That's what I've seen as being sort of the liberation that happens within this narrative framework.

Richard Rohr: Good, good, good.

Paul Swanson: It works on the My Story level, too, right? We've all had experiences where The Story I'm telling myself no longer is working for us and how we have to find a new story that can be malleable that can be a large enough container for us to grow into. We just outgrow these stories. So, I love that Jesus connection too of, "the law says, but I say." What an amazing model, again, Jesus offers so many years ago, that here we are still catching up in so many ways as followers of this man, two thousand years later.

Brie Stoner: He was a cool guy, that one. But, you know, one of the things that's coming up in this discussion is, you know, that being in between, the betwixt-ness of, you know, not, you know, being... maybe moving outside of an Our Story, not quite finding another one, learning how to trust the dissonance of the My Story and the Our Story. It's learning how to honor and make an altar to the middle, to the process, to learning how to lean in with faith, that this is part of the journey of faith, as opposed to a problem. You know, only when we construct maps, in stone, so to speak, do we get into trouble with the process of life. Life becomes problematic to a really rigid map, and so much of, you know, our spiritual traditions talk about walking in faith, but I really think we're just walking around with our noses in a map; then that's not faith. That's, you know, making a

Brie Stoner: destination out of the journey; but you're not in it. You're not in the process of becoming with courage and vulnerability.

So, if you'll allow me, I want to take a little detour. You brought up postmodernism, and I've recently been digging into some of the metamodern project—and I'm not going to go super-nerdy academic on you all, I promise, or at least I'm going to try—but one of the authors, Alison Gibbons, she described the metamodern project, which she believes is just another way, a new set of terminology to describe where we're at. She says, you know, that we're dancing in the middle. And I like that she says that. And you know, the emphasis is about being in the middle between irony and sincerity, between skepticism and heartless, and heartfeltness, solipsism and yet desiring of connection. And she says this in a book called *Metamodernism*, she says "in a crisis-ridden world, subjects are once more driven by a desire for attachment to others and their surroundings, wherever boundaries are drawn between in-group and out-group or between inside and outside."

Brie Stoner: She goes on to say, "that in the midst of this fragile and fragmentary reality, we're trying to find our ground in lived experience and the relationships between our bodies, all bodies, and the environment." And I'm bringing all of this up to say that maybe this can help make sense out of some of what we have seen in the last four years, with us versus them culture becoming the predominant way of how the Our Story existed. The Our Story was anytime there's an "us" and an "against them." Because at least for me, it helped me understand that we've been in a vacuum of sorts in our anxiety about all this change we're going through, you know, makes us prone to want to cling to a boundaried group of belonging, you know,

whether that's political, religious, or otherwise. So, I want to ask a question about the ways in which Our Story can become an us vs. them? And I want to ask both of you, what's the role of contempt in animating a small mindset of Our Story? Brian, earlier you said, you know, we look down on the poor other Ours. As an evangelic or as a Baptist missionary, we look down on the Catholics, you know. So, what is the role of contempt and how are all of us complicit in that?

Brian McLaren: Oh my, gosh, it's just bizarre that I read you the quote from Thomas Merton before, and I happened to have it up on my screen. Can I read you the next paragraph?

Brie Stoner: Yes.

Brian McLaren: Because it addresses this. He says:

“The members of a mass movement, afraid of their own isolation and their own weaknesses as individuals, cannot face the task of discovering within themselves the spiritual power and integrity, which can be called forth only by love. Instead of this, they seek a movement that will protect their weakness with a wall of anonymity and justify their acts by the sanction of the collective glory and power,” the collective glory and power of Our Little Story, Our group. “All the better if this is done out of hatred, for hatred is always easier and less subtle than love. Hatred does not have to respect reality as love does. It does not have to take account of individual cases. Its solutions are simple and easy. It makes decisions by a simple glance at a face, a colored skin, a uniform. It identifies an enemy.”

And I think this sense that hate is our great tool to absolutize Our Story by anybody in the out-group now being defined by the way we want to define it within our group. A quick anecdote, one of my neighbors, it's long story, but he was a bitter and broken man, and I grew to love him even though I've seldom had to be around someone I disagreed with more. He recently moved away and he's now actually in his last months of life. But he would, whenever we'd meet

Brian McLaren: at the back fence, he would tell me the latest, terrible thing about Muslims. And he just couldn't stand Muslims. And I said to him, “Have you ever met a Muslim?” And he says, “No, I'm just telling you what I've heard. And then I'd say, “well, let me tell you about my friend,” and then I tell him about [inaudible], and other Muslim friends of mine. And I would just tell him the story of a wonderful Muslim that I knew, but it was so interesting to watch his generalizations that he learned from Fox news and from other, you know, of his ways, favorite ways of getting information, [which] allowed him to keep the Our Story that rendered anyone outside contemptible and hateable, and any counterexample would never even be mentioned.

Richard Rohr: You know, one reason I can't give up on religion, for all the criticism I send its way—and I bet I'm speaking at least in part for you—is, one of the quickest ways out of this whole world of confusion, complexity: if you can hold The Story with grace, with moveability, with deeper understanding, wisdom understanding, nothing else gives you more room to move around inside of Our Story and My story. It's like an umbrella of protection up here. If you have a good The Story, good religion, a healthy religion, I don't need to hold on to Our Story; I don't need to defend My Story. The gift of, I'm going to say to Chris..., the Gospel,

the true Gospel, it is good news. It liberates the little self and it liberates the group self from its idolatries. And I bet you in some way, I'm speaking for the three of you too, it's why we still don't want to walk away from healthy theology, healthy spirituality, healthy religion, even though we're perceived by our own groups as being, you know, dangerously heretical, liberal, whatever. It's such a paradox, such an irony. For me anyways.

Brie Stoner: Hmm. That's such the gift that you've helped elucidate for us, Richard, and the, you know, laying out of the Universal Christ because it's the personal experience of that universal bigger story that frees us from the Our...

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Brie Stoner: ...or at least allows us to move as you said so beautifully with fluidity.

Richard Rohr: Well, I hope so. Thank you. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: In one of the recent Daily Meditations, Richard, you just said, look, that big story is what Jesus called the kingdom of God. And what I have to say for myself is: I grew up Christian, but when I started to get a sense of what Jesus meant by that phrase, kingdom of God, I knew it was bigger than Christianity that I'd been taught.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Brian McLaren: And in the Christianity I'd been taught, I had to look at my neighbor of another religion as someone either to convert or to keep away from so I wouldn't be polluted. In the kingdom of God, my neighbor of another religion was someone I

Brian McLaren: should love as myself. I mean, example after example, the environment was something to not be concerned about because Jesus was coming back, and would suck us all up into heaven, and then burn up the earth. And in the kingdom of God, every sparrow matters; every wildflower, however brief its life has its own beauty and it all matters. And to use Jim Finley's beautiful phrase, "Every this has deathless beauty," and, oh my gosh, what a liberating space. What good news. What good news.

Richard Rohr: Right on.

Paul Swanson: Seriously. That's so beautiful. And thank you two for being such guides who stroll along with us in the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, and show us, and help us see the delight, and awe, and wonder in it as we move deeper into our own becoming in the My Story, Our Story, and The Story together. So, thank you for your wisdom and for the guidance, not only this hour, but in all your work. It's truly an honor to be able to have these kinds of conversations with you all and know that this wisdom is alive and well, and being passed down, and being shared across boundaries that are just drawn in ink [music fades in], and know that we can step over them, and celebrate the kingdom of God in its vastness. So, deep bow to both of you. And thanks for being here today.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. Wonderful, wonderful.

Paul Swanson: And that's it for today's episode of Another Name for Every Thing with Richard Rohr. This

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