

LEARNING

HOW  
TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

- Brian: For many, many centuries, our ancestors woke up in a different universe than you and I woke up in this morning. They woke up in a universe where the earth was in the center of the universe, and above us were a series of crystal and spheres, the first one contained air and the next one contained fire. I guess that's where lightning came from. Then the moon was in another one and then a few planets were in another and then the sun and then some more planets and then some stars. That universe explained what they saw by and large for a long time and they felt comfortable in it. They were certain, it was the way the universe really was.
- Brian: Then along came a fella named Copernicus. He noticed some minor problems in that universe model and he proposed an alternative and a whole lot of people thought he was crazy. Some decades later Galileo came along with a telescope and he was on his roof one night looking up at Jupiter and he saw moons around Jupiter. When he saw moons around Jupiter, of course he knew Copernicus was right. This makes sense in Copernicus's universe, not in the old universe. The fact was, though, Galileo got into a lot of trouble for publishing that finding. He was called to Rome to face questioning from the Vatican. He faced the possibility of imprisonment and maybe even torture.
- Brian: The fact is when you go against what your community thinks, they often punish you. It happened to St. John of the Cross. He dared to believe that his religious community wasn't doing the very best job they could. He had some ideas for reform to improve the work they were doing. They did not say thank you for your suggestions. They put him in a latrine-like structure, took him out once a day to beat him, publicly shaming him for months on end. It was a clear message really. Don't you dare think differently, St. John. Back then, not St. John, just John. John, you troublemaker. For anyone watching, don't you think differently either. This is what will happen to you.
- Brian: Same thing with Rosa Parks. She dared to defy the norms of the entire white culture in which she lived when she decided to sit in a forbidden part of the bus. She didn't do it as many people think just as a whim one day. She was part of a group of people who planned. They knew that you couldn't change the assumptions of Southern culture, especially white Southern culture, unless somebody had the courage to make visible. She had the courage to go against the flow. If we want to go with the flow of truth and justice and integrity, it's often going to mean going against the flow of our community.
- Brian: In my religious upbringing, like many people who agreed with us were Orthodox and biblical, and people who disagreed, they were put in the cap of enemies, liberals, and maybe even communists. Community is a precious, precious thing to us. We are so blessed and fortunate to belong to communities. We depend on them for so much. But there's a dangerous element to community life too. Today, we're going to look at three biases that thrive in community life. We will call them community bias, complementarity bias and contact bias. All three require us to go against the flow.
- Brian: This idea of going against the flow might help us understand a passage in the gospels where Jesus says something that at first glance is really, really disturbing. In fact, it's just as disturbing at second glance just in a different way. He said in Matthew 10, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-

in-law against her mother-in-law and one's foes will be members of one's own household." Now, if Jesus here is advocating literal domestic violence, then we would be right to think he's gone off his rocker. But he's using this strong, disturbing language to tell us that there's a powerful flow in families.

Brian: In his culture, it was the flow of patriarchy, the head of the family, the dominant male tells his wife what to do and tells his son what to do, and that includes the daughter-in-law too. It creates a whole pyramid of submission to a dominant authority figure. Jesus is coming along and he's proposing a different way of seeing life and a different way of seeing relationships. He knows that by and large the older generation won't accept it. So Jesus as a young man, 30 when he begins his ministry and his disciples in all likelihood were about his age or younger, he's telling them, "Listen, if you're going to follow what I say, you're going to have to go against the flow of our society, the flow of our community, and you'll even feel it and your family."

Brian: Daring to break with that flow, daring to break with the assumptions of our community, Copernicus and Galileo had to do it. St. John of the Cross had to do it. Rosa Parks had to do it. You and I may have to do it as well. It's enough to humble us and make us want to pray. We did not see everything so we do not know everything. We do not even know how much we do not know, nor do we know how much of what we know is actually impartial, distorted, or false. That is why we seek to open our eyes to encounter the world afresh in humility and in silent wonder to learn to see.

Gigi: Today, we have three biases that we've grouped together because they all have to do with going against the flow of popular opinion. They are community bias. It is very hard to see something your group doesn't want you to see. This is a form of social confirmation bias. Complementarity bias, if people are nice to you, you will be open to what they see and have to say. If they aren't nice to you, you won't be open. Contact bias, if you lack contact with someone or a group, you won't see what they see. So let's open up for discussion to get us started. How do you see these three biases as being interrelated?

Brian: Gigi, the relationship between these three it seems to me has to do with our position as a part of a community. The people who are in my community, we're all nice to each other and so we all keep reinforcing one another's confirmation bias. We all get each other. We'll agree already. Then somebody from the outside comes in and they might tell me something different. Because they're not familiar, then complementarity bias can sort of trip in my brain. I think they look different. They talk different. They act different. They have different culture. They come from a different background. They are not one of us. They don't use the words we always use. I don't feel safe around this person.

Brian: So we become close to what they say. We don't give them a fair chance. But if they come in and they flatter us and they tell us how nice they think we are and we feel they really genuinely respect us, suddenly we become open to their ideas. So there's this sort of emotional gate or emotional filter we put up for how we feel about people. Then the people who just we aren't around, maybe they're the people that our group has excluded in the past. We believe anything that our group says about those people because we don't have contact with them. We never even get to encounter them to find out if they might persuade us of their own truth. So obviously, this is at the heart of racial prejudice and religious prejudice

and even cultural and ethnic prejudice. So yeah, these three biases it seem to me are all a byproduct of just belonging to some community.

Mike: It's interesting to hear you say that, Brian, because I can't help but think how crucial to our sense of wellbeing and self-identity, it is to belong to a community, right? This is something that helps us construct our place in this world and make sense of our own reality. I can't help a ponder, I know so many of us have lost communities. When you've been a part of a community and you've lost that and you feel the pain and the grief that comes from that, it gives you this crucial insight into why we cling so desperately to these social bias.

Brian: It makes sense. Community is necessary for human survival. From the time we're a baby, and almost nobody lives the life of the independent wild man out in the forest. We live in societies and civilizations. We're so dependent on each other. You can see why it's efficient for us to have people all think the same way. That way, we aren't always arguing with each other and we can get things done. But of course, if we're actually seeking the truth, now this becomes one of the unintended byproducts of a good thing called community.

Paul: Yeah. There's a story that comes to mind for my life I feel like illustrates all three of these. It puts me in the seat of the fool of the one who's engaged in all these biases, but there's a playground two blocks from my house where often I'll take my kids there about everyday. One day I was there with my kids and they're playing in the playground and I notice a man doing circles around the playground. And I go through my checklist of like, "I don't recognize him from the community, from the neighborhood. I've never talked to him before. What's he doing here?" I just see him doing these laps. So I go over and I talk to him. I say, "Hey, are you from the neighborhood?" He said, "No." I'm like, "Do you have grandkids here or kids?" He said, "No." He said, "I come here twice a day. I work near here, and I check to make sure that no one has left needles here, because I saw people using drugs here, and I want to make sure that the kids who play here are safe."

Paul: And it just shattered me, because I had all these defenses of who I thought he was, as this predator circling around, and here he was flipping that completely on its head and actually being a safe guard, looking out for my kids, even though he didn't even know them. Looking out for my neighborhood, even though he wasn't a part of it. Looking out for my community, even though he wasn't living inside of it. And there was so much egg on my face, and then I flipped into the niceness, the complimentary bias of just being like, "Thank you so much. What a gift you are to humanity for showing up like this for me and my kids, without me even knowing it." So yeah, that story came to mind.

Brian: Such a beautiful story, because both of you were motivated by concern for your community, to protect the children.

Paul: Yes.

Brian: And even with the best of intentions, sometimes we have trouble. And if you hadn't

had the wisdom to go over and talk to him and the openness to talk to him, I could have imagined you calling the police and him getting arrested, and who knows what could have happened, right? We've seen other kinds of stories unfold like that.

Paul: Right.

Brian: That's a beautiful, beautiful story. So community bias, for a huge part of our history, was necessary for our survival. Still is in so many ways. But it also meant that we became tribes, and we developed markers. Tattoos, hairstyles, clothing styles, and of course language, and 100 other ways of knowing, "Here's somebody who's in our in-group. There's somebody who's in our out-group." And one of the consequences of this beautiful thing of community is that we often are tempted to value tribe over truth. And so I think that helps us just set up this terrible predicament you felt that day. You were concerned for the children at the playground, and this is a potential threat. That concern can lead to wonderful outcomes, and it can lead to not so wonderful outcomes.

Paul: Well said. Well said. And I think too, the way that community bias helps us learn about Jesus, too, the way he often went out into the wilderness alone, that has been ... I remember when I first read those verses as a kid, always being confused why Jesus was going out into the wilderness alone, and that needed break from the groupthink, from community, from that sense of togetherness to go into solitude, to actually be able to hold community bias in right relationship. I'm very curious, for the three of you, how has that been something that you've engaged in or seen the value of, or seen what happens when it's not place?

Gigi: I think of how these biases work with those of us who consider ourselves loners, or who have always felt like we were kind of outside the community, even though we are identified socially as part of certain communities. And it also makes me think of how these biases, these three biases actually work to socialize us in certain ways. I remember growing up, I grew up in the National Baptist Convention, which is the largest African-American Christian denomination, and my parents were very involved in the church. We were in a foster home, and I had two foster siblings, one of whom was six months older than I was, and she was getting ready to go to school, but because I was born on the wrong side of December, I couldn't go when she went. But even though she was learning to read, my mom decided that I was going to learn to read anyway.

Gigi: So I learned to read, and since we were very much into our church, I learned to read the Bible. And I remember as a kid, just being struck ... I had one of those, and I'm sure, Brian, you remember those King James version with the red letters, whenever Jesus would speak. And I was just fascinated and really felt a lot of resonance with that. And then I would go to Sunday school, and just something just seemed to be off. And in my four year old mind, what I told myself was, "It isn't that these adults are withholding something from me. It's that they don't know."

Gigi: And so even though I can have that in the back of my mind, because these adults are responsible for me surviving, it isn't like I can say, "Okay, they don't know. Goodbye.

I'll see you later." I have to stay in that community. And as I stay in that community, and there's nothing confirming that thought in my mind, but there's all the other social confirmation biases, there's community biases that are saying the opposite, it becomes very hard to hold on to that essential self that's where that thought came from. It becomes very, very hard to hold on to that, unless you have some time by yourself.

Gigi: And even then sometimes, if that's all you have, and the only voice you have is God in the voice in your head, it still becomes very, very difficult. And I know in my church, if not once a month, at least once a quarter, there were sermons saying how ... And that they used the term "homosexuality," how that was wrong and anyone who was gay was going to hell. And when I learned that I was a lesbian, that made that very difficult, because there was no one in my community saying something different. And even though we knew, there was gossip of who the lesbians were and who the gay people were, my parents just made sure I had no contact with them, you know?

Gigi: So that socialization, even when you know that it's not right, and that it isn't the whole truth, it still makes it harder for you to live authentically if you have no way of stepping out of that community.

Brian: That story so powerfully just shows how all of those social biases work together. Yeah. I feel this. I went through some years as a pastor where I was trying to break through into a different way of seeing my theology, and the background I come from, they aren't really very tolerant of people who ask certain questions and think differently. And I remember for a period of years where I was in the thick of rethinking, on my day off, I would literally drive two hours west of where I lived and hike along a trail along the Potomac River, and I just needed to be away from people to be with my own thoughts. And I would say if I was walking for six or eight hours, two or three hours it took just to let the old voices fade, and for me to let my own thoughts make it to the surface.

Brian: And oh, yeah. Again, it's such a gift to be part of a community, but here's where, if you want to be simple, if you have simplicity bias, you'll say, "Community good, solitude bad." Or you'll say "Solitude good, community bad." But we're saying, no. They're both good, and they need each other. And they both can be a problem if they don't have the other.

Mike: It's interesting. I'll just riff off what you were saying, Brian, because my own story also involves being a pastor at one point. And also I'm the son of a pastor, so I'm a PK, and I was one of the good PKs, because there's a stereotype that PKs are either really good or really bad, so I got to be the golden child at the center of a community. And then that community imploded at one point, and I was on the outside of it, and it was when I was on the outside of the community that I became aware how much I benefited from the community bias, and all these social biases. I was right at the top, just reaping all the benefits of it, and then had to deconstruct it and see how blind I was by getting tossed out. And I think that's an interesting thing, right? Some of us heroically go out into the wilderness to get perspective, and others of us get booted out, and then look over our shoulder and realize what was really going on.

Brian: Wow. Powerfully said. Well, I think there is so much more we can say about community bias, but it's going to come up because it's interrelated with our next two biases. So maybe

this is a good time for us to just learn that prayer for community bias.

Gigi: Here's the prayer we will practice at the end of this episode when we're doing the prayer for community bias. "Inspirer of holy boldness and humble bravery-

Mike: ... give me the humility to learn from my community-

Paul: ... along with the courage to differ graciously from my community-

Brian: ... seeking truth even when my companions are unwilling to see it or accept it.

Gigi: Help me remain humbly loyal to the truth-

Mike: ... even when I am misjudged and rejected by my community for doing so."

Brian: Let's turn to complementarity bias. If people are nice to me, I tend to be nice to them, and that includes then believing what they say. And if I experience people as being mean to me, or if I don't think they like me, then I feel no obligation to believe what they say. It has nothing to do with how truthful they are or the evidence for what they say. I'm biased based on my feelings about them. I think we've already seen how this exists, but we can see how in a sense, groups reinforce this because if one in-group makes another out-group their enemy, then everyone approaches one another with hostility. Which means that, of course, we're going to believe what our friends say and reject with those other people say.

Mike: It's interesting. Complimentary bias makes me think of how Jesus taught us to treat others. Treat others as we would like to be treated, turn the other cheek, forgive rather than seek revenge. It seems like he's trying to break us out of this complementarity cycle of eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Also, smile for smile and blessing for blessing.

Brian: This hits me, Mike, when I think about a couple of times where people have had a really powerful breakthrough in my life. Sometimes that breakthrough happened because they were really, really angry with me, and their anger was data that tempted me to reject what they were going to say. But they couldn't help but be angry because I was hurting them.

Brian: Oh my goodness, to be able to have people be angry at you and not take it personally, as the saying goes, and react to the anger, but to say, "Well, of course they'd have strong feelings if I'm hurting them." Their anger makes me, maybe I should listen to them even more. Now that's not always true. Some people are angry when they're just nasty.

Brian: But to say, "Oh, I better be careful when people are angry with me or where they speak in terms I don't really understand at first, and I don't know their jargon or their lingo. They might be from a different community I could really learn from." So this complementarity bias really does require us to start to reverse that, treat others as we would be treated, not as we have been treated.

Gigi: That makes me think of two sort of similar episodes. One of them involves email. I think email's always the easiest way to misunderstand people. So it about an incident and it was an email and I read it thinking I was reading one thing and of course, that wasn't what it said.

- Gigi: The thing is, this is after having the contemplative practice. Where there was actually that space in my mind where I can make a decision to either just stop and think, or just let my anger go. I saw myself choose to let the anger go because it touched a really, really deep wound in me from my childhood that I thought I'd got over, but I hadn't. So I just let it go.
- Gigi: Then the response was, wow. Then because of that response, I had to reread the email and realize that, oh, he was talking about himself. He wasn't talking about me. So we did have a talk and we were able to reconcile. So that was one.
- Gigi: Then the flip side of that is a very close friend of mine. We have phone conversations every Sunday. There was something, apparently there's this pattern that I had fallen into in responding to some of the things that she said, that it was totally unconscious. I had no idea I was doing it.
- Gigi: So I get an email from her, the subject is in all caps. So I knew I was in trouble. I was like, what did I do? I don't even know what I did. There was something, for whatever reason, I had started to when she would bring some certain things up, respond in a negative way. Not intending to be disrespectful to her.
- Gigi: But as I read her email, I saw, okay, she said this. I said, I can see how she took what she said. So immediately, because she was a close friend, I just said, "I am so sorry. I can see how you did this." For her, that was a huge deal because she had been going through a state where there were people in her life who were really treating her in ways that weren't good and she would call them on it. Then that would be the end of the relationship.
- Gigi: So I was happy not to be in that pattern with her because I really value her as a friend. But I just noticed those two different ways of responding and both to that, to email.
- Paul: Email is the great bear that we all deal with, if you look on a regular basis. The example that came to my mind involves my neighbor across the street who died recently. The first time I met him, I was outside in our yard and he yells at me. He had that kind of curmudgeon personality and he just said, "Hey, did you steal my garbage can?" Inside I'm like, who is this man who is accusing me of thievery?
- Paul: Then I had a moment of expansion and I just asked the question, "Why would I steal your garbage can?" He goes, "Good question." I went over and said, "Hey, my name's Paul." He said, "My name's Ray." From then on, we were incredible neighbors and friends. I just think about what could have happened if I would've responded with just responding in that same way.
- Paul: Unlike my previous story, I actually showed up in full presence, I think for that kind of interaction. But it was such a lesson on what relationship can be if someone shows up with kind of an energy that is so off-putting or curmudgeonly. If I am able to show up in my own body and my own presence with even a spark of love, it has the opportunity to turn into a friendship for the next however many years.
- Brian: If we connect that to the next bias we're going to talk about, which is contact bias. When you realize whenever a person establishes that kind of friendship across a barrier from an in group to an out group, it makes the flow of information, and the flow of truth, and the flow

of insight possible between two groups who previously had no connection at all. So here again, we see how these different biases are really connected.

Mike: Here's the prayer used to address complementarity bias. Spirit of wisdom.

Gigi: Protect me from being misled by those whose words are full of flattery, familiarity, and false promises.

Paul: And keep me humble enough to learn from those.

Brian: Whom I am tempted to dismiss as strange, difficult, or unfriendly.

Paul: Lovely. Let's now turn to the contact bias. As I think we've talked about, these just overlap. So these dovetail so nicely. That if we lack contact with someone, we won't be able to see what they see.

Paul: So knowing that we've been sitting in this conversation, circling around it, how do you all think the contact bias relates to community and the complementarity bias? What springs to mind?

Brian: A story always comes to my mind in this regard. When my wife and I first got married, we moved into an apartment, a new apartment when we returned from our honeymoon and right upstairs from us was an Iranian family. It just so happened, those were years where there was huge tension between the US and Iran.

Brian: There was something called the Iran Hostage Crisis that was going on. So there's all this tension. But this was a single mom who had a boy about eight years old named [Armeen 00:30:30]. When Armeen and I became pals, he was just like my best friend. There weren't too many kids around, so he was always happy to see me.

Brian: If we ever left our front door unlocked, Armeen never knocked, he just came in. He felt so at home with me and Grace. Of course, we were newlyweds. So we had to make sure we kept our door locked.

Brian: But through Armeen I got to know his mother. When his mother found out that there was an American family that liked Iranians, she started introducing us to her whole circle of Iranian friends. So we got invited to have some of the best food in the world and come to some of the best parties in the world and our lives were so enriched.

Brian: So right at the time, when people in the United States were saying terrible things about Iranians, we were having this absolute opposite experience that then gave me the opportunity. I don't know how many conversations where I hear people say something terrible about Iran or Iranians. I would just sort of speak up and say, "Well, I got to tell you, my neighbors are Iranian and they are some of the funnest, finest people I've ever met."

Brian: Suddenly now I became then an agent, an insider with other groups, who could maybe challenge them to rethink some of their biases with people, with whom they had no contact.

Mike: That's a really powerful story, Brian. One of the things I can't help but think about is, in this

exact moment in time where we find ourselves on the calendar, how in some ways, contact bias has become even more difficult. Because obviously in an era of social distancing, it's hard to make contact with people.

Mike: Also, a lot of the times that we're making contact, it's through a screen in a machine. Where there's a technology between us. I think there's a dehumanizing component to that. I don't know if anyone else resonates with that.

Brian: Yeah. It just is a reminder to us that in a time of pandemic, we have to go the second mile to break through that contact bias in ways that we can.

Brian: I think this is one of the things that the arts do. The example that always comes to my mind is there's a wonderful novel by Chaim Potok called *My Name Is Asher Lev*. He wrote many great novels, and it's a story about a hyper Orthodox Jewish boy with extraordinary artistic talent. And I remember when I read that book, I thought, "I'm learning more about what it's like to be raised in a hyper Orthodox Jewish family in New York than I ever could have known any other way." And I remember feeling like, "For the rest of my life, I now have a window." And of course it's not ... I don't know everything about all hyper Orthodox Jewish people, but at least I know something. And I have a feel for one boy, in one family, in one community. And I think the arts do this for us at times when physical and personal contact isn't easiest all the more, if the art that we take in is actually created by someone from that community who is giving us a window into their soul too.

Brian: I think contact bias makes me think of an encounter in the gospels when Jesus meets a Syrophenician woman. It's one of the few times we actually see Jesus interacting with a Gentile. There are a few others. He interacts with a Roman centurion, and he interacts with a Samaritan woman. But what's really interesting in the gospel accounts of Jesus in his interaction with this Syrophenician woman, he doesn't just teach her; we, in a sense, see her teach him something. He goes into the encounter not expecting much from her, and he comes out being really, really impressed by her faith. And I think that's just ... Maybe the gospel writers kept that story in, they didn't let it get edited out, because they realized that Jesus was setting an example for all of us that when we have contact across in-group-out-group difference, it's a chance for us all to learn something.

Gigi: I was thinking one of the least ... And I think it's still true in many African-American communities, but definitely in the one that I grew up in, it was very important that everyone get an education. Because that was seen as a way of having a better life than your parents. And so my parents, they never censored what I read. And I remember when I was in fourth grade, I got my own room and I got my own radio. And even though in my neighborhood, they were supposedly ... the kids were only listening to three different radio stations, I figured I had the whole radio. I was going to listen to all the radio stations. And so I had these ways, these windows, into other ways of seeing, and being, other cultures that I really, really enjoyed. And that carried through into my adult life, and it carried through into just a fascination with just religions in general.

Gigi: But there were certain religions that didn't make that cut. And I remember I went with my then partner, we went, curiously but kind of hesitantly, to our first solstice celebration. Because ... You know? These were witches, right? So we use fake names. And we wanted to

know how it was going, but we were really, really afraid. And of course we went, they were very nice, and we had a really good time. But it was having to, first of all, make the decision that we were going to do that, even though we had some hesitation. But still making that decision to do that, that's something that I remember. And it made me just understand back to all the confirmation bias, and all the other biases, is that the stories that I was told actually have absolutely no truth in reality.

Gigi: But even if I might know that intellectually, they still influence how I behave and just that lens on the world. They make that pinhole even smaller just because of, even if I don't believe them intellectually, they're still embodied in me in some way. And so having that courage, even knowing that I'm still afraid to take that step, I think is very powerful.

Brian: What a great story.

Paul: That is. Thank you, Gigi. So let's bring in the prayer for the contact bias:

Paul: Revealer of insight...

Gigi: Do not let me be satisfied to see only what is visible from my limited perspective.

Mike: Grant me insatiable curiosity to understand-

Brian: ... What my neighbors can see from their different vantage points.

Gigi: Help me draw near to them, to walk with them-

Mike: ... To see through their eyes, hear through their ears-

Brian: ... And to feel through their experience,

Paul: so our shared horizons will be broadened.

Brian: So here are three biases, community complementarity, and contact, that challenge us to acknowledge that there is a flow to the groups we're part of. We cluster with people who like us and think like us. And if people think differently, we pressure them to conform to us or we squeeze them out. That means that our groups become ingrown and un-diverse, and we lack contact with outsiders who see things we don't see. And when we meet people who are from outside our group, because they don't look like us or talk like us or pray like us or vote like us, we disqualify them from having anything to teach us. We then find ourselves trapped within a great wall of social bias. And if we want to break out, it's going to take courage and it's going to take strength and guts and grace to go against the flow of our community, and to follow the flow of truth.

Brian: And so we invite you to repeat each line of this prayer, making it your own:

Mike: Source of wonder, help us see with wonder.

Gigi: Depth of mystery, help us find delight in truth so profound that they surpass all knowing.

Paul: Fountain of compassion, help us see with compassion.

Mike: Bringer of justice, help us see with justice.

Gigi: Revealer of truth, help us see what is real.

Paul: Holy wisdom, whose presence fills our ever expanding universe, help our horizons ever to expand.

Brian: Light of glory, help us to see with humility and awe.

Brian: Amen.

Gigi: Amen.

Paul: Amen.

Brian: Thanks so much for joining us in this important time of prayer. If you'd like to engage with these prayers or intentions even more, they're available on our sister podcast called Practices For Learning How to See, you'll find the link in the show notes.