

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Brian: Just this morning I was walking around my yard. It's a mango season here in Florida and I have 14 mango trees that I am good friends with. So, I was checking out the mango trees and out of the corner of my eye, right at eye level, there is this momentary blur of blue. It took me a minute to find where it landed. It was a dragonfly. It was sitting still on a leaf, right at my eye level, and it's just seldom that I see a dragonfly sitting still long enough for me to possibly see it up close. I walked up close and I got within literally three or four inches of it with my face. I wonder what I must have looked like to its little bulbous eyes as this monstrous creature staring at it, but it seemed calm in my presence and I just got to study it and look at it and enjoy it. I later looked it up online and it was called a blue dasher, which just seems to me, a great name for anything, especially a dragonfly.

Brian: I thought here I am, I'm 65 years old, and today was my very first encounter with a blue dasher, at least an eye-to-eye encounter where I noticed it enough to wonder what its name was, wonder about it. I think about how many things in life are like that. Even when you live to my ripe old age, you just realize there is so much that I missed up until this point in my life, and so much more to explore, and maybe even risk an encounter with.

Brian: One of my great loves in life is birds. People who like birds don't like to be called birdwatchers. They prefer the term birders. But you think about that word, birdwatcher, it's somebody who's practicing the art of seeing, and not just seeing. If you love birds, you'd listen, which is probably why birder is a better term. But seeing and listening to birds, noticing things around us, trying to actually have some kind of an encounter with them. Same thing goes for stars. People are called stargazers, who in a sense heightened the art of noticing stars and let themselves pause and linger long enough for a deeper kind of encounter.

Brian: It strikes me that if we have these arts or disciplines or practices of enhancing our seeing, maybe that helps us get a feel for what religion is supposed to be. It's supposed to be a community that helps us see the invisible but ubiquitous presence of God, and wonder, and life, and light in the world. It got me thinking about our podcast and how we're trying to recover this art of seeing, this art of being in the world with wide open eyes, attentive eyes. In a sense, I suppose, we're trying to fill in a gap that it seems like our religious institutions have, in a sense, let the ball drop or got distracted with other things.

Mike: It's so interesting to hear you say that, Brian. As I think about it and I reflect back on the season leading up to this, I found myself drawn to one of my favorite passages of all time. It's a quote written by the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung. You can find it in the 12th volume of his collected works.

Mike: I'd love to read it and see how it lands with everyone. But Jung wrote this. He said, "Christianity must indeed begin again from the very beginning, if it is to meet its high educative task. So long as religion is only faith and outward form and not experienced in our own souls, nothing of any importance has happened. The person who does not know this from their own experience may be a most learned theologian but they have no idea of religion and still less of education. Theologians often fail to see that it's not a matter of proving the existence of the light, but of blind people who do not know that their eyes could see. It's high time that we realize it's pointless to praise the light and preach it if nobody can see it. It's much more needful to teach people the art of seeing."

- Brian: Well, that image of not proving the existence of light but of helping people who actually have eyes be able to see, obviously that evokes Jesus' words about whoever has eyes to see, let them see. Oh, my, powerful quote.
- Gigi: It makes me think of something Karen Armstrong said in the History of God, which was just when the Jewish religion and Islamic religion had to say that it's just futile to try to prove God, Christianity took it up. And I don't think we ever really got past that.
- Brian: It would be so different if instead of trying to prove anything to people, we actually help them see it for themselves, so they didn't need the proof.
- Paul: That seems to be part of the contemplative dimension that's such a gift to Christianity, to the church of starting with that interior and having to move towards the exterior, that should start with that purity of humble hearts that would eventually kind of open up and go out towards a world. It doesn't come from the exterior religious practices, which of course all religions will build upon those and build them into their systems, but there's so much of that radical movement in those early days, even the first 400 years, where you see these attempts to figure out how do we live this out, how do we express and try this on. Part of what I hear with that Jung quote is just that interiority at the beginning, that is certainly connected to the world and communities at large, but there's something about that personal nature of starting with one's own place in one's own heart as the seed of transformation out into the world.
- Mike: It's so interesting to hear you say that, Paul, because I think what we're seeing... I don't know about the rest of you, but what I see with a lot of my friends, colleagues, peers is so many people who get into crisis when the external forms of religion, the beliefs, and the practices that they have been given just cannot line up with their personal experience and actually find them at odds with it or perhaps the beliefs and the practices fail them in a real time of need, and they're feeling empty in their personal experience. So, it's kind of this... I can feel that, the need to go back again to the beginning because it really doesn't feel like many of us got the chance to start there.
- Brian: Gosh, it makes me think that when people's faith begins to fall apart and they enter quote, deconstruction, then we see it as a failure instead to see it as an opportunity. That phrase that Jung used... What is it? "Christianity must begin again from the beginning." Instead of saying, "Oh, the church has failed," we could say, "Oh, we've been presented with this amazing opportunity of trying to begin again from the beginning."
- Mike: I grew up in a family where four of us were church planters. So, four of my five family members were pastors one way or another. We went through a season where it felt really great and we felt like a very religious and holy and special family. And then, we went through a really, really bad season, that culminated that in really a lot of personal tragedy.
- Mike: What happened in 2008, my brother, who was a pastor, ended up taking his own life. So, it was a massive, massive tragedy. It threw me off kilter in so many different ways. And then, just a few months later, my mom, who was also a pastor, checked into the ER with a headache. She had a migraine so bad that she couldn't see. So, I got a message and my sister called to let me know. She said, "Just so you know, mom's going to the hospital. I

remember a dear friend of mine at that time said, “Don’t worry. It’s going to be fine. The universe could not be so cruel as to give you another crisis this close to the death of your brother.” The next morning I got a call, and they said, “If you want to talk to your mom again, you need to get here today.”

Mike: So, it threw my entire religious world into a tailspin. One humorous or encouraging anecdote after that was... I was reading about the life of Carl Jung and at one point in his life, everything kind of blew up and he had a major, major breakdown. The biographer that I was reading said, “Jung, decided to approach it with curiosity.” He thought, “I’m a psychologist and I’m having a breakdown. So, I can approach this as an opportunity for a psychologist to study a breakdown from the inside.” And I remember thinking, when everything was on fire and I just couldn’t make sense of any of it, “Well, maybe I can follow his example. At least in this, as a minister, I can approach a total religious breakdown as an opportunity to learn what it feels like from the inside, and maybe something will come of it.”

Brian: Wow. Oh, my goodness. If you don’t mind me asking, how does it feel these years looking back on that? Does it feel like that really precipitated some of the places you’ve explored and been able to go since then?

Mike: 100%. I think that what was very uncomfortable at that point was having to see a religious bias that I didn’t know that I had, which was thinking that because we were quote, unquote, good people, life, God, spirituality would protect us from suffering. I didn’t know I believe that until it was violated. And then, I realized it was a big part of my world. And then, I think everything in the last... What is it? 13 years has been kind of a journey into that, but honestly, it’s felt like switching from a black-and-white television to a widescreen, HD, vivid color presentation. It’s one of the most shattering and painful things I ever experienced, but I feel like I stepped into a much more real universe as a result.

Gigi: That makes me think of one of the obstacles to seeing is this sort of cultural reflex that we have to push away suffering, and that if you push away suffering, you’re also in some ways pushing away pathways to joy because if you are not allowing yourself to feel one thing, you’re not allowing yourself to feel anything. I think that might be something we’re not thinking about the church. I’m not sure if the church has really done... Nothing’s ever a hundred percent, but for the most part, across denominations, I’m not sure the church has done a lot to help people be willing to be open to suffering. I mean, they have answers to suffering, but do they provide the answers? Well, those answers don’t always work as you have talked about, Mike.

Gigi: Those two things that you talked about... The curiosity. I mean, curiosity is seen as questioning and doubting that’s usually just not what you’re supposed to do. Just for being that open to the inquiry of what’s happening and what’s going on. The other thing I think about is, here in this country... I would think of religion, even though we don’t say that, religion is a part of culture. And in this country, we have a huge culture of individualism. So, when I hear... There’s so much, even in my religion in the National Baptist Convention. Yes, we do pray to God, but really in many ways, we act as if it’s up to us to do things and to make things happen. And those places of

suffering often, at least they'd have in my life, taken me into that place where there's nothing I can do. All I can do is surrender and leave it up to God. And then, that tends to make my life just become much more open to possibility, and to see things, and to go on to directions that are much better for me that I wouldn't have seen otherwise.

Brian: Gigi, as you say that, I just think maybe this is part of what's happened to many forms of Christianity and other religions too. Instead of saying, "We want to help you learn how to see," they have decided, "There are certain things we want you to believe." So, the focus is not on helping you learn to see. It's telling you what you have to believe. Mike, you had some beliefs that if you love God and if you're doing good work, you shouldn't ever be hit with two incredible tragedies in short order. And then, those beliefs fall apart.

Brian: I'm thinking how COVID has done that to a lot of people. There were many people who thought like, "I'm sure if we did a statistical analysis, no group of Christians, who are unvaccinated and are exposed to the virus..." Their faith does not give them any statistical advantage over somebody else. There's a whole lot of people who believe that their faith would give them that if they went to church, and then they got sick. We all know there's a whole of people who didn't believe that their preferred presidential candidate could lose, and then when he lost, they've been in this turmoil of meeting conspiracy theorists to explain why.

Brian: Something happens when your belief falls apart where you say, "Okay, that's gone. I guess I better try to see what's still there." Maybe that's when, in some ways, this failure, again, becomes an opportunity. I don't think we're saying this to blame religion or to blame Christianity or beat up on. I think, in a sense, we're trying to help ourselves be compassionate that our religions have had problems. They've let us down in some ways, but this is our opportunity, and instead of blaming them, we're saying, "How can we turn this problem into an opportunity?"

Mike: I so resonate with that, Brian. I think this is a super, super nerdy thing to say, but my kind of little catchphrase when I came out of that life experience was that the only answer to theodicy is theophany. Christian theology has this obsession with theodicy, which is the question of, if God is good, why is there suffering? And I feel like you get to a point where you kind of don't care. All that matters is the question of theophany like, "Where is God? Is God there with you in the midst of that? Can you teach people how to find God or can we work together to see the divine in our most painful moments?" Because I think three-quarters of the theology we obsess about is just the bargaining stage of grieving, where we're just trying or just grasping for something to make reasons so we can cope. And I think there's a healing that takes place when we can let that go and move past it. At least that's the way it was for me. I don't know how it's been for the rest of you.

Brian: It's funny, when we suffer, we go from... Before we suffer, we may have been looking for answers and explanations and doctrines and belief systems, but suddenly you're thrown into suffering, and you're looking for comfort and hope and peace and presence and strength. One of our terrible problems I think is that we're given

definitions of God of, a God who is in control, a God who makes things happen, a God who's like the chess master moving the pieces, and our suffering creates an unsolvable crisis. Like you said, that's what theodicy is all about. This unsolvable conundrum of how, if I have those assumptions about God, could these terrible things happen? And in some way, it requires us loosening up some of those beliefs about God, in order to experience and see a way that God might actually show up, but it won't look like what we were looking for.

Paul: I love that. Those have been questions that's been pressing on my own mind and hearts. I had the opportunity last night to go see my first live concert in this pandemic time, and to be with a group of people, and to celebrate life and just the joy that music can bring. It was overwhelmingly beautiful and it just have that kind of aha of like, "The kingdom is here at hand." So, there was a moment of seeing that within this pandemic, and post pandemic, and the ongoing pandemic. We have yet to see where this is all going to go.

Paul: And then, I think of, where is God in climate change? Where am I going to find... Here's the taste of this nugget last night. And then, I look at my kids and I see the Western United States are on fire. I see flooding in Germany. I see all these things happening. And I think, where is Christ in the climate change? How do I pass on? How do I teach my kids to learn how to see amidst global chaos, and things not going as planned or as I thought they should? How do I give them the practices and tools and find the communities that will supports the seeking of God, the seeking of Christ within climate change? It's a big, big unknown for me. Climate change is one of those things that hovers over me like a cloud, like Linus in Peanuts, where he had a cloud over his head. I can feel that, at times, just bearing its burden.

Paul: So, it's interesting to hear this conversation. It resonates so deeply. And then, to be in the midst of like, "I have no lessons from this. I am just sitting in that unknowing." So, I tee that back up to this group around this learning how to see.

Gigi: I think that's part of where contemplation comes in. I think of two things. One thing that contemplation has taught me is that it's not that, where God is? It's that, where isn't God? That all of this is God. Even the parts that we don't like, that's God. How do we allow ourselves to see that, when we're getting all these messages that say that God is this perfect being, God is all good, even though there's a passage in Isaiah that says that God created evil? How do we allow ourselves to allow God to be whole, and not just who want something that we think that... We want our ideal perfection. And projecting that on God, how do we allow God to be whole?

Gigi: And then, I guess the other... To me, I am a big fan of mutuality and that it's never a hundred percent up to us. We get to go halfway and are met by the other way. So, I think part of us, being able to see, is to allow ourselves to be seen as well. What are those things in our lives? It often comes to we have to go to those places of shame, those places where we feel that we're not worthy beneath those masks that we put on. What does it take for us as well to get into that place of trust, where we can allow God to see us?

Brian: It strikes me that this is really one of the gaps that CAC is trying to step into, to say, "Look, maybe a lot of our religious institutions have been preoccupied with other things. Without judgment, we can just acknowledge that seems to be the case, but I wonder if we could just reflect a little bit together?" I'm especially interested in you Gigi. With your special role at

CAC, I wonder if you could talk to us about how you see this as part of the vocation of this whole community?

Gigi: The first thing that comes to mind is what Richard calls the alternative orthodoxy, and that, in Christianity, there actually are two stories about Jesus. One that most of us know and have grown up with is this atonement theory, that Jesus came and died for our sins and part of it, in some ways, Jesus's dying is our fault. But then, there's that alternative orthodoxy, that instead of starting with original sin, it starts with original blessing. So, CAC starts with giving us an alternative way of seeing, a way that is more life-giving, more open, that actually has a place for all of who we are, as opposed to just those places that'll get us into heaven, so to speak. That's my first answer. Paul's been at CAC way longer than I have and Mike is also doing a lot at CAC. So, they may want to chime in as well.

Paul: I love that. I think the original blessing started from that kind of place that builds into the alternative orthodoxy. My audio cut out for a minute, so apologies if I didn't quite hear it. But then, the tools and practices to help sustain this sense of beginning from a place of blessing, and then flowing from that pasture out to the world and to the community, I think that the CAC hovers in that space of trying to... I mean, Richard says this so often, right, at the edge of the inside. I think part of that foothold is being in relationship to the tradition, as he talks about his tracing of tradition, scripture, and experience, but then, also allowing this contemplative dimension to help set our view on reality. As you were saying earlier in your other response, you should have just an openness and allowing the wholeness to be welcomed in, and not just the stated preference that it isn't the acceptance of all that is, that one can actually begin to engage with the world as it is from a place of true self.

Mike: That's really beautiful, Paul. I think, for me, as the newest person on the team, I'm thinking about, where so many of us would find CAC from the outside. I so appreciated, Gigi, your reference to the other story and the idea of substitutionary atonement and all these things. I think so many of us grew up with a religion that was in the idea of producing a very harsh morality, and it gave us this divine image where God was an angry parent who was going to punish people for doing wrong.

Mike: A lot of us can get to a point where we can look back and see that, that's probably an immature belief that has its place in a certain stage of growth, but if we really believe that the divine is punishing people for their actions, I think at a certain point, what it does is it creates a lot of cognitive dissonance in us. And it causes us to respond to suffering by looking at people who are suffering and saying first, "Gosh, I'm so glad it's not me." Right? And then, second, "They must have done something to deserve this. They must have done something to cause this." And then worse, the religious answer, which is "If I can just correct them, then their suffering will go away."

Mike: CAC, I think, does such a profound job of meeting people who've been wounded by that belief system because it does create a tremendous amount of cognitive dissonance, where you can't feel the fullness of your feelings, as you were saying earlier, Gigi. And there's so many places you can't go. And then, life drags you there and your human experience. And you have to feel the fullness of great love. And you have to feel the fullness of great suffering. And somehow, with that comes empathy and a desire to begin to make sense of the things you're seeing and feeling that you didn't have permission to see and feel before.

- Mike: That's what I love about the mission here is it doesn't run from that. It embraces it. Everything belongs. It really hurts sometimes, but it's all a part of the arena where the divine is at work. For me, that has been very healing and it's been very inspiring to work in an environment that's not afraid to go to the place of suffering and not afraid to retroactively look backwards and say, "Okay, where have our religious belief has been harmful and how can we take that apart and learn to see it differently?"
- Brian: That's really interesting for me to hear you all say that. That in a sense, one of the gifts at CAC is that through Richard and through the rest of the team, we're trying to provide people an alternate vantage point because what you see is determined in part by where you stand. Right? What's your vantage point? This alternative orthodoxy is an alternative vantage point and you can maybe see some things from there that you don't see otherwise.
- Brian: As you all know, I've been really interested, especially in these last several years, in the subject of authoritarianism. My interest in authoritarianism... I'm not interested in it like, "Can't wait to try some of that," but my concerns about authoritarianism are overlaid with my whole interest in this subject of bias that we've been taking so seriously because it seems to me, one of the ways that authoritarian leaders work is they use our biases to manipulate us to do their bidding and do their will. On my really cynical days, I start noticing that one of the ways authoritarians work, Mafia, and so on is through protection rackets.
- Brian: I hate to say it, but there's a sense that a lot of theological systems work like a protection racket. You tell people they lack something, and then tell them you can provide it. In religion, we tend to say, "Our institution, our organization will provide it for free, but then of course, there are lots of major strings attached if you keep wanting to receive it." And then, we make a not-so-subtle threat if they don't accept our free gifts. And that creates a whole way of seeing the world.
- Brian: But this takes me back, Mike, to that line from Carl Jung, that we're not having to prove the existence of the light, but we're telling people, "You already have eyes. There already is light there. We're just trying to help you see and use the gifts that you've already been given. We're not telling you, you have a lack. We're telling you the opposite. We're telling you, you have treasures that you don't see yet." I don't know. As I think of that, that feels like maybe part of what that word grace actually means. It's not focused on lack. It's focused on surplus and helping you see how you're already blessed.
- Gigi: Just going back to the light. I think often, in our religion at least in Christianity, we look outward for light, but Jesus also said that we are the light of the world as well. I think one of the things... The CAC is the Center for Action and Contemplation. Contemplation is that place where we learn that the light within us is also the light that we are seeking, and hopefully, that will lead us to learn that the light that is in us is also the light that is in everybody else. So, out of solidarity, we act to bring love into the world.
- Gigi: There's so many programs of the CAC that are meant to support that. There's some Daily Meditations. There's this podcast. There's online ed programs. There's the Living School. And then, there's a CONSPIRE Conference that's coming up. And that CONSPIRE Conference is looking at those stories, the various stories, and the various levels of stories. There's the story about me, the We story about us, and then, the World story. Being who I



am, I always like to bring in something else and that is because it's from my life. I needed to work through, what I would call, their story to get to Me, to get to my story and to learn what, out of their story, made sense for the We, for our story. And some of the World stories are really... They don't work for me, even though there are those who would say that they do, but then, there are other World stories that do work for me.

Gigi: So, for me, it's just looking through those different stories. There isn't like, there's one... I mean, they all work together. There isn't like there's... First, you have me. Then you have We. And then, you have the World. And then, you're in the World and that's it. But the Me, and the We, and the World, sort of interweave and they work and they inform each other. It would be interesting to see how all that comes through at the CONSPIRE Conference, but for now, I'm just wondering if anyone has any words about those stories.

Brian: First, I've got to say, Gigi, your bringing in of their story, stories that are imposed upon us by others, my gosh, that really has to be part of the way we talk about the interaction of these three stories because that certainly happens on the level of race. It happens on the level of politics, and religion, and gender, and social class, and economics, and wealth, and power, and all the rest. So, that is a powerful enrichment to that framework. But I'm thrilled that this is going to be the theme of this year's CONSPIRE because it seems to me, a whole lot of us are so into our own pain or our own ambition or our own fear that when we look at the world, our vantage point is the vantage point of me. What can this do for me? How can this make me feel better? I'm guessing that there's a lot of others of us. We are way more preoccupied looking at the world through our Us story, whether it's our religion or race or nation or whatever.

Brian: I have to say that I spent decades of my life trying to be a good Christian and that meant looking at the world through something called the Christian worldview, which was an Us story. In other words, to the degree that I focused that my ultimate goal was to have a Christian worldview, in a sense, it meant that I could never transcend that and look at any larger stories of the world and the cosmos, and take seriously the stories of my neighbors. In my upbringing, I couldn't take seriously the stories that science brought to the table. Yeah. It just seems like this is a good time for especially those of us who are trying to learn how to see, to take seriously these different stories by which they become our vantage points for seeing the world.

Mike: It's funny, I think, Brian. In the first episode, you asked us all to offer our own definition of bias and I said, I tend to think of bias as a GPS system. And instead of thinking about those layers of stories, I've been thinking about this a lot, I've always thought of it as kind of a... I'd use the GPS thing. The stories I tell myself about God, the stories I tell myself about people, and the stories I tell myself about myself. Right? So, you have GPS there.

Mike: I think about what happens when one of those stories fail. It seems like, a lot of time, when one of them fails the other two go as well because they're so interconnected, right? Especially, right, it's been a very unpleasant experience to realize how often my stories about people and God are just a projection of my story about myself. So, having that fall apart is very unsettling and it leads to feeling very lost, but it's also such a paradoxical gift to get it out of the way and let you see things afresh and see things anew, and then go back to that place where those stories are being told to you and you can listen, as opposed to really thinking

you have it figured out. Again, I think I've said this before, obsessing staring at a map in front of you, instead of looking up and looking at the mountains or the sunset.

Brian: Yes. Well, it has been a really great pleasure and honor again, this season to be in this conversation with you three. My goodness, it's been so rich. Mike, I want to thank you for the vulnerability that you shared in telling us of that painful event in your life today. I wonder if you could close this time by rereading that Carl Jung quote in just a moment. But we've been talking through all these series of episodes about how prayer is intentionally strengthening and guiding our desire to see what's true, to see what's real, in a sense, say, "I'm sure I'm being limited and boxed in by my biases. I'm sure that my vantage point has limitations and I'm asking for help from outside myself to help me not be limited by those things. And I'm calling out for help.

Brian: There is a beautiful song by one of my favorite songwriters. It isn't on a CD yet, but it was just released on YouTube. It's by the great musician, Bruce Coburn. And I thought I could read this as a kind of closing prayer. We'll put it in the show notes where people can hear the song being sung online, but it's a kind of prayer that it seems, to me, can in some ways bring together these rich conversations we've talked about today. And then, Mike, you can close by reading us that beautiful quote. Here it is from Bruce Coburn. It's called Us All. And that phrase, us all, I think is bigger than me and it's bigger than the Us stories, but it's the us all, the whole cosmos, all of us humans in all of our diversity, plus our fellow animal creatures and plant creatures, plus the stars and everything, the us all in the biggest sense. Here it is.

Brian: Here we are faced with a choice, secrets and walls or open embrace. Like it or not, the human race is us all. History is what it is. Scars we inflict on each other don't die, but slowly soak into the DNA of us all. Us all. I pray we not fear to love. I pray we be free of judgment and shame. Open the vein. Let kindness rain o'er all. Us all.

Mike: Christianity must indeed begin again from the very beginning if it's to meet its high educative task. So long as religion is only faith and outward form and not experienced in our own souls, nothing of any importance has happened. A person who doesn't know this from their own experience may be a most learned theologian, but they have no idea of religion and still less of education. Theologians often fail to see that it's not a matter of proving the existence of the light, but of blind people who do not know that their eyes could see. It's high time that we realize it's pointless to praise the light and preach it if nobody can see it. It's much more needful to teach people the art of seeing.