

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 4, Episode 1

Introduction to Season 4

feat. Dawson Allen, Gigi Ross, and Michael Petrow

Brian: Welcome everyone to season four of Learning How to See. In this season, we're going to be looking at the question, "Do I stay Christian? And if so, how? And if not, how? How am I going to be a human being going forward?" And in this season, I'll have some amazing conversation partners, including the wonderful, poetic, brilliant author, Barbara Brown Taylor, the passionate, intense, fun, energetic pastor Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis from Middle Church in New York City, and the eco-spiritual activist from Santa Fe, New Mexico, Todd Winward. So before you get to hear these conversations with these dear friends, I wanted to bring together some other dear friends from the Center for Action and Contemplation, who we've been working together in various ways in recent years, and we're going to take a little retrospective as we look back on the first three seasons of Learning How to See.

I am very, very grateful that I get to have as my conversation partners today some wonderful friends and colleagues from the Center for Action and Contemplation. And as we begin, I want to invite each of them to introduce themselves. First, Gigi and Mike have been kind of my co-hosts and partners in crime through the first three seasons of Learning How to See. And we'll have a new guest also from the CAC team, Dawson Allen, too. But Gigi, I wonder if you could just introduce yourself to folks who may not know you and tell them a little bit about what you do at the CAC.

Gigi: Sure. Gigi Ross, I am the Living School manager, which means that my focus is on the student experience of the Living School. And also, as we are continuing to improve and refine the program, making sure that input from the students gets involved in that as well.

Brian: Thanks, Gigi. Hey, Mike. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at CAC.

Mike: Sure. My name is Michael Petrow. I work with the department here at CAC that focuses on our education strategy and maintains relationships with our faculty and focuses on our content. So it's quite a lot of fun. I like it a bunch. My background is jungian psychology and comparative religious studies and a little bit of theology. So it's a really fun sandbox to play in, especially with good people like all of you.

Brian: Well, a little bit of theology, based on what I know, that's a gross understatement, but we'll forgive you that dishonesty. And Dawson Allen, so good to see you, and tell everybody a little bit about yourself.

Dawson: Yeah, so good to be on with y'all. My name is Dawson Allen. I am the movement partnerships coordinator at the Center for Action and Contemplation, which is essentially thinking about how the CAC can be in relationship with other organizations and in this expanding movement that is emergent. So that's what I do at the center.

Brian: We want to go back at the beginning of season four and just have this short episode to review seasons one, two, and three. And seasons one and two were really a package. Under the theme of learning how to see, we started by talking about biases. And one way to describe or define biases is to say that they are glitches in our seeing, not like an optical illusion, that's a sort of physical glitch in our seeing, but in the way we process what we encounter in the world. And we looked at a list of biases, and as you'll remember, I'd sort of wrestled these different biases into alliteration all beginning with the letter C. And I wanted to ask you, Gigi and Mike, as we've kind of had those biases in our own consciousness and

thoughts over this year since we recorded and distributed those first two seasons, have you seen them at work in your life? And do they ever come to mind? And has it been useful to keep them in mind in any way?

Gigi: I would say they have come. I don't know how I could be myself and live without them showing up all the time. And confirmation bias is, of course, in some ways, I think is kind of like how many of the other spring from just wanting my world to confirm what I think my world should be in all the myriad ways. And that's actually, I would say one of the roots of my practice, is learning how to accept that that's where I come from often and also not to let that run the show. And so for me, this actually has been a year I feel where I've been able to have more space between having a bias way of looking at something, but not actually reacting from it. I think contemplation has given me the practice and the tools to let the existence of those biases actually be more like what I would call mindfulness bells, just reminders for me to look inward and see where I am relying more on myself and not actually allowing reality to be what it is. So that's really been a lot of my work this past year.

Brian: Gigi, as you say that it reminds me of what Father Richard often says, that contemplation is opening ourselves to all of the reality we can bear. And that includes the reality that our own awareness and perception goes through filters, and biases are some of these filters. And you think of how impoverished our lives would be if we still lived under the certainty that what we see and the way we see is the way things actually are. So I think that's beautifully said. Mike, anything come to mind for you?

Mike: I so appreciate that, Gigi. It's been an interesting journey. Once you get that lens into those biases, it's really hard to unsee them. And so it's been a really, really fascinating journey to take that into practice. And then what's been interesting for me has been to recognize where I can struggle to find the balance of the appropriate amount of self interrogation, and I would even say cynicism or suspicion, where I have to be wary to use different language. Sometimes even deconstruction can become my bias or my bias can be looking for bias. And so it's been so tremendously helpful for me and it's also been a good insight for me to wonder at what point do I have a healthy inoculation of cynicism and I'm looking for all the biases and I'm being suspicious, and that's provoking humility and gentleness and seeing the other side of things, and when am I just using it as a tool to take anything down? I'm not sure if that makes sense, but that's sort of what I've been pondering of late.

Brian: Gosh, Mike, that makes sense. And it's so realistic and really so helpful, because if we just had one bias at a time, that would be trouble enough. But our biases, we can have a compound fracture, we can have compound biases. And I'll give you an example, something I was just reading about recently. I have a deep interest in the theory of evolution and in Charles Darwin's work, and I'm interested in integrating evolutionary theory and theology. And I came across this philosopher of religion named Loyal Rue, who I think made a truly novel insight about evolution. We talk about survival of the fittest, which is a misnomer, it's really survival of those that fit best. So that means survival of the most adaptive and survival of the most cooperative and survival of the most beautiful or attractive because attraction is a big part of evolution. But he suggested that we should also talk about survival of the most deceptive, because when different species learn how to deceive to camouflage themselves, to trick other creatures, it gives him an evolutionary advantage. But then he says that if some species are very good at deception, others have to become even better at perception. So he

talks about a kind of race between deception and perception.

And as soon as I read that, I realized that I am deeply worried about being deceived. I have had people mislead me enough times that I am really nervous about that and I want to be hyper, hyper perceptive and that sort of thing. And what that can easily do is make me not trust anybody. Now, obviously even people we trust, we have to be aware that they have biases and we have biases, so everything can be complicated by that. But here's where another bias, consciousness bias, which we could talk about dualistic consciousness and then post-dualistic or non-dual, I realize that the world isn't as simple as I can trust some people and I can't trust others, or I can't trust anybody, or I have to trust everybody. Suddenly I realize I need non-dual thinking so that I don't fall into that trap. So I think that is relevant to me right now. Hey, Dawson, any thoughts or anything up to mind for you about this idea of that learning how to see involves learning how to see our own biases?

Dawson: Yeah. To build off something that Gigi shared, I love this shift from thinking about learning how to see into how to be, is that thinking about the moments that those biases pop up as invitations to practice, invitations to learn and grow. That's what's coming to mind off the top of my head here.

Brian: Well, Dawson, that perfectly explains why we did two seasons about biases, because the first season we just wanted to help people understand what they are, and then the second season we wanted to help people practice contemplative ways of facing our biases and strengthening a desire for truth and reality. So you nailed exactly why we have two seasons there.

We had seasons one and two where we dealt with this important subject of biases, and then we came to season three, and that was the season where we introduced some concepts from my most recent book, *Do I Stay Christian?* And if you want, you could think of it like this, in season one we're looking at biases which are kind of on the level of our psychology, on the level of our brain functioning. Our brain wants to be efficient. And in many ways biases are products of efficiency for brain investment. In other words, it's way more efficient to just kick out ideas that disturb the way I already think, it'll keep me going. But then we talked about, we in a sense said, and one of the lenses through which we see is the lens of our faith. And so for those of us who are Christian, the way we see Christianity and the way we see through Christianity affects everything we do. If we could have Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Jews and others, who they could talk about how their faith has affected their seeing and how they see their faith and how that affects their seeing. But we talked about this from a starting point as Christians.

Mike: One of the things I so loved about season three and the way you structured it is that it mirrors your book. And I have to say the sheer genius in the simplicity of asking the question, "do I stay Christian?", And then answering first, "No," and giving credence to all the good reasons to say no to that question. And then answering, "Yes," and looking at the other side of it and all the good reasons to say yes to that question. And then landing on the practical, "If we are going to answer yes, how in the world do we do it?" That yes, that no, yes, how rhythm is so great, and I love that you were able to

work it into season three. I'd love to ask you to say a little bit more about that for us and how it felt to live into that and how you feel it worked itself out.

Brian: Well, I'll tell you something a little embarrassing about that. When you come out with the book, you have to do a whole lot of interviews to help people hear about the book. And so I've talked about this book an awful lot since May of 2022 when it came out. And in the process of all those podcasts, I said a couple of things that I thought, "Why didn't I include that in the book? This said it way better than I ever said it in the book." And one of those little sentences was that I don't want anyone to say... Well, first of all, people could do whatever they want, whatever I want, but just to say what I discovered and realized, I don't want people to say yes without in some way also saying no. And I don't want people to say no without also saying yes. In other words, if you're going to stay Christian, say yes to the treasures of Christian faith, but also say no to the elements of Christian faith as we've inherited it that have been harmful. And if you're going to say no, by all means, say no to those things that have been harmful and could cause further harm in the future. But try not to say no to the things that are of value and precious and good.

That yes and no together, it seems to me, was what I was aiming for, even though I didn't fully really understand that until after the book had come out and I was doing a hundred podcasts on it. But that last third of the book that structures this new season of Learning How to See is saying, whether you stay Christian or not, you have to wake up the next day and you're still alive. And you could say, "Well, today I'm alive as a Christian," or, "Today I'm alive as no longer a Christian," but you've still got to live. And how are we going to live? And what's interesting to me is that question of, "Wow are we going to live?", gives people, whether you identify as Christian or not, a whole lot to talk about and a whole lot to think about. And so that was really the shape for season four of the book.

And it might be useful for me to just go through the seven chapters in the book, Do I Stay Christian?, that really give us the episodes of this season. I'll just mention them briefly. We had Include and Transcend, obviously an important theme from the work that Richard Rohr has done and that the Center for Action and Contemplation is all about. Next, Start With the Heart. Look at the desires that are really giving shape to our lives. Next, Rewild, get back in touch with the natural world, get more deeply in touch with the rhythms and wisdom and shape and intelligence of this beautiful created world that Richard often says is the original word of God, the original statement or self-expression of God. Then next, Find the Flow. Think about the movements where we could see that wisdom at work, and how do we find and join that larger flow? And then we talked about Reconsecrate Everything, realized that our world doesn't consist of the sacred and the secular, but of the sacred and the desecrated. And how can we start to realize that we can't throw things away? Even the things that are harmful, we have to recycle them somehow and we have to find the sacred in everything we can.

And then was Renounce and Announce, letting people know where we stand. Because that word Christian, in many ways, its meaning has been corrupted to mean opposite things. We have to renounce and announce and make clear what we actually

stand for. Next was Stay Loyal to Reality, which of course is what our first two seasons were about, facing our biases and trying to really desire and embrace reality and the truth. And then finally, Stay Human, that the question of whether I'm Christian could become a distraction from the deeper question of what kind of human I am being and becoming. I'd love to hear maybe from you, Mike, and then you, Gigi, your reflections on the episode you were involved with. And then I'm interested, Dawson, any thoughts you have on this deeper question of, "Do I stay Christian?" How about it, Mike?

Mike: Sure. I really enjoyed that first episode, Christianity is Many Things, because we were able to look through history and realize all the different shapes that Christianity has taken. You ask the question, "Do I stay Christian?" So much of how you answer it is dependent on who's asking, who's answering, what do we mean when we say Christianity? And we realize that at different points in history, it's been a very fluid phenomena. So I think one of the things that I really came away with, three big beats for me in my listening to that episode after the fact was, one, wondering, is Christianity a conversation? Is this what Christianity is? Is there something fundamentally Christian about talking about what Christianity is? And then wondering, is there something fundamentally Christian about saying no to the question, "Do I stay Christian?" Is there something very Christian about skeptically interrogating Christianity? And then all the different shapes that that conversation and that questioning can take and all the different things we bring to the table when we choose to be a part of the conversation, whether we take on the name or not. So all that to say, it's given me a ton to think about. It was a great conversation and I'm still sort of having it in my head, so thank you for that.

Brian: Well, that's great. By the way, that's another thing that I think you just said better than I ever said in the book, but the idea that it could be the most Christian thing you ever do to ask the question, "Do I even want to stay Christian?"

Mike: Right on.

Brian: And you could say no to staying Christian for deeply Christian reasons, so well said. Gigi, how about you?

Gigi: What comes to me just thinking about the title of that episode, Christianity, Race and Politics, is that all three of those things are constructed by humans. God's not a religion. Jesus didn't really come to found a religion, he came to show a way. And the way that Christianity became the world dominated religion that it was was by joining hands with power. And the way that race is constructed in the US is also to allow power to stay in power. And politics is how power is used. And none of this is actually necessarily bad or good, but I want to go back to what Mike was saying about deconstruction.

And for me, one of the reasons I decided to stay Christian was because it was human and because when I was growing up, everything was the word of God. And so it's kind of hard to struggle against the word of God. I just figured I was just a bad person because this wasn't making any sense. But when I could see that what I was actually struggling to get was something that was human, then I can actually trust my own inner wisdom and trust my own relationship with God to help me with the staying Christian. And the way that all of those three things, Christianity, race and politics, also all of them being human constructs

means that they all can change, they can be transformed. And so even though there's a lot of things happening now that are really awful, there are also a lot of things that are happening now that are working to change that awfulness. And so I can still have hope even as Christianity, race and politics continues to serve those in power.

Brian: Gigi, I love that, just the sensitivity that power is an element of every discussion about anything human beings are involved with. That right there is an incredibly important guideline, I think for people, and treasure for people. And also the idea that anything we talk about is flux and it could be changing for the worse, it could also be changing for the better, it could be doing both at the same time in different sectors. Wow, that's a gift right there. Any thoughts from you, Dawson, or questions that come to mind?

Dawson: Yeah. Well, there's a couple things that come to mind. One is sort of situating the question that you ask in the title in a historical moment. Like I'm thinking about the recent Gallup research that shows that for the first time in American history, religious participation is below 50% in America. And so I'm wondering, and I'd love to hear each of y'all's response to this, why is the question, "Do I stay Christian?", important to ask right now?

Brian: Dawson, as you say that, I'm remembering a quote, I think it might have been from Walter Brueggemann or it might have been from Stanley Hauerwas, or maybe I just can't remember who it's from. But someone said, "At some points in Christian history, it took more courage to not be a Christian than to be a Christian because you'd be in a setting where all the norms were set by Christians and you would experience harm for refusing to go along." And then we may be coming into a time where, depending on what we mean by Christian, but where once again, it takes courage to be a Christian because, well, for any number of reasons. And as soon as we go from Christianity being a majority religion to something other than a majority, then the game changes. So I think that's one response. Mike or Gigi?

Gigi: I think another reason why this question is a good one to answer is because of the polarization of just saying the word Christian. It has been used throughout history and even currently to cause a lot of harm. And a lot of people feel like, "If it's causing harm, then we don't want to have anything to do with it." And so that's one side. The other side is, I remember we had a staff gathering, and we had broken out in small groups, and the person who does our social media said something that I hadn't even realized, is that we used to be able to look at audiences and use the word Jesus. But now you can't even use the word Jesus on social media to find an audience because even Jesus, that word has become so polarizing for so many people.

I think part of the question of, "Do I stay Christian?", is you have to come to grapple with what that word means for you, and what it means to be a Christian, and how it actually means to live as a Christian, and how willing are you to say that, in fact it's something that Brian said earlier about announcing, "This is what I believe Christianity is." Because there's so many words now that have become so polarizing and the reflex seems to be the toss out the word. But if you keep doing that, we're not going to be able to say anything. At some point we have to really look at what are we saying yes to and what are we saying no to in that word, and be willing to have those more nuanced conversations, which seems to be more difficult to do right now.

Dawson: If I can throw one thing in there that comes to mind, and then Mike, I'd love to hear your response, is this sort of impulse towards purity. I'm thinking of Brian's conversation with Richard about a cult of innocence and this impulse to govern and seek purity, whether it's behavior or ideology. Yeah, I think that's such an important thing to name in our culture right now and check the way that it's showing up.

Mike: Yeah, that's brilliant, Dawson, I appreciate that. It's an interesting thing too, just having come through a season where so many of us engaged in ritual washing and practices of cleanliness to protect ourselves from disease, how deep that archetypal drive for purity gets triggered in ways that'd probably be on the scope of this conversation. But it's a wild time to be thinking about those things. I think for me, the question, "Do I stay Christian?", I think matters deeply because I feel that so many people I know who have been shaped by the best of an ethic that comes out of the roots of an ancient Christian culture are driven to question the Christian institution. So we're getting back to this idea that folks who had never claimed the name Christian criticize the Christian institution for fundamentally Christian reasons. And I'm not trying to co-opt people or claim people. But the best, I think, of the ethics that we see today are rooted in Jesus' teaching, and they force us to question an institution that's been co-opted by power and empire.

And the other thing I would say is humanity as a species does not do well under religious monopoly. I've been having fun with a sci-fi novel recently that for whatever reason went back and looked at the Tower of Babel myth and they talked about how, whatever that means, one of the great gifts of humanity having multiple languages and multiple spiritual systems and multiple religions is that it protects us from the danger of zealous monopoly. It keeps us in conversation, it promotes creativity, and it protects us from the monolithic power of spiritual abuse when it's all in one institution. So I think there's something terrifying and healthy and profoundly ethical in the fact that so many of us are wrestling with this question.

Brian: I'm really grateful to each of you for this time, and it's been so good to partner with you in this podcast so far. I look forward to hearing how folks interact with the episodes of this season, and I look forward for us to get together for another conversation down the road. Thanks again, everybody.

Gigi: Thanks, Brian.

Dawson: Thanks, Brian.

Mike: Always good to be with you.