

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 4, Episode 2
Include and Transcend

feat. Barbara Brown Taylor

Brian: About 40 years ago, I became interested in theories of human development with their various stage models. Over the decades, I've studied well over a dozen models that try to describe general patterns in the way humans grow. I've seen with increasing clarity how spiritual development is affected by each new stage of our human development. The reverse is also true, our growth or lack of growth in spirituality inhibits or unleashes our cognitive, relational and emotional growth. Their relationship is reciprocal. How could it be otherwise?

Whether or not you choose to stay Christian, here's what I recommend; pay attention to your human development, to the stages you are entering, inhabiting, or leaving. If you are ready to grow to a new stage, but your current form of Christianity keeps you from doing so, you're going to be frustrated, and rightly so. You may let your current beliefs and practices trap you, so you stagnate or even regress. That sense of stagnation or stuckness may eventually drive you to leave Christianity entirely, seeking room to grow elsewhere. That's certainly understandable, but you have another option too.

You can leave your current form or stage of Christianity and enter a new form or stage that allows and even encourages the growth that you desire and need. A lot of people leave Christianity when really all they needed was to leave a confining form or stage of Christianity. Some people think leaving Christianity will solve their problems, not realizing that their problems are as rooted in their stage of development as in their religion. The reverse is also true, some atheists,agnostics or people of other religions become Christians because Christianity aids in their growth. But eventually, even though a certain form of Christianity solves the problems of one stage, it can become a problem at another, creating a stained glass ceiling that impedes further growth.

Welcome everybody. I am really happy to have as a conversation partner, a friend, Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor. I'm just trying to think of how I can best introduce Barbara. Maybe I can do it by this anecdote.

I came into pastoral ministry not through the normal route. I was planning to be a college English teacher. And I was a singer-songwriter as a young guy, and still write music. But I think I approached in my early years in the pastorate, I approached the sermon as an art form. So I was always interested in just what I could learn about preaching. And I would ask people, "Who's your favorite preacher?" It would be one of my questions when I met another pastor. I can't tell how many people would say Barbara Brown Taylor.

So Barbara, before I ever met you and even knew that you were a writer, I just heard that you were a great preacher. And then, of course, I discovered your writing. So I'm super happy to have you here with us.

And I wonder, before we get rolling, you've written a lot about your life, is there something about you that a lot of folks maybe don't know, that might surprise them, that you could share?

Barbara: Gosh, that I am so much more comfortable on audio than video. I guess, in the first century, I'd be in a cave somewhere, with friends who drop by with food and I'd take them some, but I think most people know that too. I sort of take up the introvert cause whenever I can. So I think everything I've ever thought is already in print.

Brian: Well, that just means that you must not have many idle thoughts because you haven't written any idle books.

Barbara, this chapter that we're discussing, include and transcend, begins by just this recognition that we all go through stages, from childhood to the stage of life you and I are at.

I think all of us know that there's some value to stage theories and there's also some downsides. I'd love to just hear what's been your history with learning about and thinking about whether stages of faith or just stages of human development.

Barbara: I love the place in your book when you talk about perhaps you're ready to change stages instead of change religions or drop religion. And I, like you, have been fascinated with stage developmental theory from the first time I really was exposed to it in college, and then in seminary, and then sideways by a father who was a psychology professor. So I think I came by a lot of my interest in psyche-soul-ology, psychology, through my father and his love of his work and the crazy friends he brought home.

So I've been fascinated with it all along, though I have to admit, I think I'm more cyclical than I am linear or hierarchical. In other words, most of the stages have an ideal top stage, and it's hard for me to stay there before falling all the way back down to the bottom rung and having to climb back up again on some subject of faith or life or self-understanding.

Brian: There's a way of reading the Bible, especially the Hebrew scriptures that seize terrain as almost a metaphor for psychological terrain. So you're a slave in Egypt and then you end up in the wilderness. So in a certain sense, you have a scripted life and then you are, in a sense, in a place of freedom, but also danger, where you have to figure out how you want to be. And then, there's the conquest stories of trying to get some land of your own and then what happens as soon you're exiled again.

So that sort of language of, in a certain sense, having a place maybe that's very defined, then being displaced, then finding a place, then being displaced. There's a kind of cynical... Not cynical, cyclical feeling. Maybe it's cynical too, but cyclical feeling to that.

As you know in this chapter, when I talk about the four stages that I've kind of synthesized and adapted from some other people, I think we go simplicity, complexity, perplexity, harmony, or solidarity. But then that fourth stage, if you live there long enough, becomes a new simplicity. And just when you think you've arrived, then you get bombarded with another wave of complexity and so on. So it really is just the territory of life, isn't it?

Barbara: But the stages remain helpful, don't they? Even if they're sort of a pilgrimage route that you keep going around and around in there, it's helpful to know where you are. So it doesn't lose its value, though I do think I have multiple stage personality disorder. I got that while I was reading your book. I'm just always at multiple stages and life pretty much takes care of that.

Brian: I have a feeling that reflective people feel that they have the weaknesses of every stage. I feel that with Enneagram or Myers-Briggs or whatever, it's like whatever the weaknesses they describe, "Yeah, I think I've got that one."

Let's talk about this issue of outgrowing a stage, but thinking that means we're outgrowing

our religion or our denomination or even the idea of religion in general. You worked as a parish episcopal priest for many years, then you've been a professor at a university, working with young adults, many of whom wouldn't really identify as having faith, and others coming from very strict religious upbringings. And you also have shown real interest in kind of the life of people in other faiths, you reflected in your book. Beautiful, wonderful book; Holy Envy. I'd just love to hear your thoughts on the relationship between leaving a faith, leaving a church, and leaving a stage.

Barbara: So I listen to you go through that, I realize that to leave a stage means to leave a whole language often, to leave a whole community often, because anyone listening will know already that when one leaves a stage, that can be taken as criticism to those who are still comfortable or being nourished at that stage.

So there's the built-in grief of growth perhaps, is when those whom we were most in sync with become disappointed in us or saddened about our leaving. So it gets all mixed up in that for me. But there's no avoiding it, it is necessary. And I think what happens after it has occurred over and over again, is you begin to realize there's more language and there are more communities and there are more things to realize or things to be revealed to you. So there's always manna that follows the hunger somehow and people to eat it with. So once that's happened once or twice, I've decided to trust that.

Brian: Yes. Oh, my goodness, that's a good way to say it. And I guess, that's what makes it so difficult the first time you start to outgrow something you inherited or adopted at a certain stage in life. You don't have that confidence that the manna will fall in the new territory.

I've often thought of it in terms of game theory, that we learn the rules of a game, and we become more or less successful at the game, and then we decide we don't like the game anymore or the game doesn't work for us anymore. And we go from being an expert player in one set of rules to another setting where we don't even know the rules, and that can be very disorienting.

Barbara: It's disorienting, but at my age, neuroplasticity is a big deal. When I'm demoted back to beginner status, that's just a great opportunity for some new connections. So I've learned even to accept the disorientation as a brain blower in the best sense.

Brian: For folks who don't know, Barbara's husband, Ed, and I have gotten to know each other in part through a shared love of fly fishing. And I was out on a river recently, I'm at an age where I can't see clear enough to thread a fishing line, tip it through the eye of a hook. When you said being a beginner, I feel like a little three or four-year-old learning manual dexterity and all the rest.

But there is something about that as we get older, of being able to embrace being a beginner again and trying to get some new neural pathways working. That is humbling for sure, but it also I think is what draws us to certain things, isn't it? It's what keeps us growing and alive.

Barbara, I'm thinking about your work with college students, and I'm remembering

many years ago I used to be on a kind of speaking circuit for campus ministries. So different, mostly evangelical, occasionally Catholic campus ministries would have me in to speak. And I remember being at some Thursday night campus fellowship and the meeting was over and people were hanging around and this earnest young sophomore and this earnest young junior got into a big, big theological argument, and it was Calvinism versus Arminianism, or free will versus predestination. And they were passionate and I could feel everybody in the room taking sides. I was probably 28 or 30 myself, but I remember when I used to be deeply drawn into those conversations. I remember, I didn't have the language of stages so much to think about it then, but I remember thinking, "Gosh, this is an argument I don't want to be part of. I have no interest in winning. I have no interest in this whole process at all."

Barbara: The angels of God were not leaning over the edges of clouds to see how that one would turn out, I don't think.

Brian: But this really is something, isn't it? It's part of growth, to say, "I'm just not interested in that anymore," and maybe giving ourselves permission to not be interested.

Barbara: And remembering that when I got into arguments like that, I was flying for the first time. I had the vocabulary to pursue those arguments and to offer footnotes. And that was exhilarating in its own way, because I hadn't been equipped to do that before.

One question that always comes up for me when there are stages is, "How do we stretch toward new heights without looking down on those below?" Because the stage of harmony, let me tell you, has more jagged edges in it than it sounds like. That's a difficult place to stay, in harmony.

Brian: So true. And really, that beautiful example you just gave, so I'm thinking about these two young students having an argument, but then you remember the exhilaration of that and the fact that you're sharpening your skills, sharpening skills of critical thinking, argumentation, logic. And the fact that part of maybe what I realized is that whichever student felt he or she won the debate, give them time and they're going to find problems with their winning solution.

That's one of the problems of being older or more experienced or if we dare say more mature, is that we forget both the exhilaration that you spoke of and the fact that you don't get to point C without going through point B. So to see the value and preciousness of each stage and kind of the work that's there to be done in each stage.

Barbara: Yes.

Brian: Toward the end of the chapter, include and transcend, in the book, I say that maybe part of what happens to us is we realize that in our efforts and strivings to be more religious and faithful and good and orthodox and mystical, contemplative, whatever our measuring stick is, that maybe we get to a point where we realize, "I'm just trying to be more human. I'm trying to explore what it means to be a human being more fully." And I'd love to hear any thoughts you have on that.

Barbara: That it warms my heart so, so much. I hope we'll have more opportunity to talk about

this. But it occurs to me that if religions do not in some way teach us what it means to be more fully human and even perhaps teach us about times when they transcend themselves, to put us into relationship with humans who are not like us and don't share our religion, then I don't know why I want to be religious. In other words, if a religion cannot transcend itself in order to deliver me to a more full humanity with other human beings, then it's incomplete for me. So that seems huge.

I often remember something, I think it was Gandhi's grandson who said... Well, he said, first of all, "The problem with you people of the book is that you tend to love the book more than you love the people." And then he said, "What we have most in common is not our religion, but our humanity." And I have leaned on that so, so often, both in the teaching of world religions and in the nourishing of my own humanity, with so many flaws, but also so many raw edges that can bring me close to other people. So yes, that theme in your book to me is precious in all of its iterations.

Brian: I want to come back to that idea of the jaggedness of harmony. Talk to me about that. I think it's really important for us to pause there and really feel that. In many ways, it's what you were trying to help people both not be afraid of, but also be honest about in your book, about darkness. Could you share a little bit about that?

Barbara: Yes, and I suppose the piece I'm seizing on today with contested elections in my State of Georgia is to arrive at this stage of harmony, of believing, "I'm part of a whole," and that all the parts belong and that there are uncomfortable precious teachers in that. That's a hard place to stay because it requires so much ego surrender.

If we're talking about stages of human development, just the amount of ego and rightness I have to surrender to consent, to be in community with people who are undoing everything I think that's worth doing and that I want to be part of doing, and they're busy undoing it, to remain in harmony there takes... Oh, let's meditate 18 hours a day to get there. I don't know what it takes. It takes washing feet probably far more than meditation.

I know the ways in which it's transformative. I have stories of people who crossed a boundary and made a friend where there was an enemy and they both changed. But I know way more people who want to change each other than want to be changed. So that's the trick with harmony.

Brian: Just over the weekend, I was reading a long article for people in the climate change world in trying to address the problem of climate change. It's kind of like a Dear Abbey or a help desk article. People send in their stories of, "I'm trying to talk to my mother about climate change and she works in the fossil fuel industry and I can't get her to see how much harm she's doing." That sort of story. And the very patient and wise and also firm person answering the question, this is what she just kept coming back to, "Your mother is not going to be interested in anything you have to say until she feels that you actually understand the difficulty and complexity of her life."

And that ability to have empathy with people, as you say, who it feels are a threat to everything we spend our lives working for, oh my goodness, that keeps us humble, doesn't it? It's like a set of skills that we spend a lot of our time working on the opposite set of skills and

we have to find a way to develop this set of internal skills without weakening our work and the labors.

In fact, as this writer was saying, those efforts at compassion and empathy, true understanding, in the long run will maybe make us more effective, but you can't even enter into it just to make you more effective. You have to enter into it with a genuine concern to understand your counterpart.

Barbara: There you go. Harmony is hard.

Brian: I think it's very good for us to capture that. I also think one of the things that happens when I think about watching those two college students arguing about a theological paradox and source of contention, I think we eventually, some of us, and I think this has to do with perplexity and harmony, get comfortable saying, "I don't know," get comfortable saying, "The more I think about that, the less satisfied I am with any of my possible answers." And we get comfortable with living with that kind of mystery. But I think for some people, they wish they could be there, but they just haven't gotten there yet. I'd love to hear any thoughts you have on that, Barbara.

Barbara: I remember discovering Nicholas of Cusa, who is a 15th century guy who wrote a book, translated into English, on learned ignorance, and I fell in love with him. He talked about people who don't know that they don't know, and then people who don't know but think they ought to know. And then, at the stage of learned ignorance, those who embrace unknowing as part of the human condition.

So I suspect there isn't a person alive who isn't familiar with unknowing, but they're stuck at number two, which is they think they ought to know. And so, it's very difficult to embrace unknowing as part of the human condition, which leaves a lot of room for the divine to function in ways that surpass our understanding.

But I love the idea, because again, I've cyclically gone through all of those. I don't know that I don't know. And then, I know I don't know, but I think I ought to. And then, finally I can say, "Bring it on," John Keats, negative capability, the ability to live with mystery and unanswered questions, and that is where human beings meet if they can stand it.

Brian: I've paid attention through the years to when Richard Rohr drops little definitions along the way, and I remember a couple of times I've heard him say, "Faith is how we manage what we don't know," and there is a vulnerability to it. And also, here's where it gets tricky, a lot of us, early stages of our religious development make us feel guilty for not knowing. And then, we find actually an invitation to the humility and the faith, of saying, "Yeah, I don't have to know this, and I actually can live with a sense of wonder and curiosity that are even better than knowing."

In the chapter, when I talk about that stage of harmony or solidarity, where we say, "I'm just not that concerned with how other people label me, and I'm not really that concerned with how I label myself," I'm thinking about your work not only in the Christian faith, but your work understanding and teaching and connecting with people of other faiths. It seems to me there are stages in just about every faith where your insider status is a really big deal, and then there are ways that people hold their faith with... They just hold it differently. I'd love to

hear any reflections you have on that.

Barbara: My response to your question has less to do really with other religious traditions than it does with at the moment, what happened when I moved from the city to the country. Because I live now in a place where there aren't enough people for me to live in a silo. I live with neighbors who could so easily label themselves or label me by the political signs in our yards, or their suspicions based on me or mine about them based on 10 other things they say.

But it has been such an eye-opener to find people of good and ill will behind every political sign, mean people and kind people behind every political sign, so that I find myself less interested in the labels than I do with things like, "Do you have grandchildren? What do you give your money to? What matters to you? What moves you enough to volunteer in the community?" Or to ask about other things than the labels. But wow, are we all fast to go for those?

And it must be because we're scared because we think there's safety in our own collectives, but it has really messed up my categories to move to a county where my vote never counts and I'm surrounded by neighbors who would get up out of bed in the middle of the night to come help me.

So I know those two things don't solve each other, but they at least put me back into perplexity. Am I in perplexity or complexity about that? It's not quite harmony, but it's at least enough for me to question my own certainties about other people and who they are based on the way they label themselves or I label them. So I don't know how we're going to handle that one nationally or internationally, but we're in it.

Brian: Yes, to see another human being's kindness or sorrow or need or generosity, it connects us with them on that level of humanity and maybe helps us put those other labels in their right perspective.

I'd like to leave you with this short reflection from part three of *Do I Stay Christian?* "Little by little, more and more of us discovered there was a way to stay Christian beyond the first half of life, beyond me, and we stages, beyond simplicity, complexity, and perplexity. That new kind or stage of Christianity scared us a little. We had been warned by our teachers in simplicity and complexity, that anything other than what they offered was dangerous, even damnable. But we experienced a delightful surprise, from this new vantage point when we read the Bible and especially the gospels, what previously looked two-dimensional, black and white, static and small began popping out into something three-dimensional, full color and ever expanding."

With all this in mind, I'd like to give you permission to make a shift in your thinking. What if you are really trying to change stages, not religions? What if you're really trying to leave, not Christianity, but simplicity, complexity, or perplexity or the me-ism and we-ism of the first half of life? What if your real desire is not simply a way to stay Christian or put Christianity behind you, but a way to be more fully and maturely human? Can you see that you could leave Christianity and be no less stuck in some other form of simplicity, complexity or perplexity, whether religious or secular? Or can you see that you could stay Christian in an early stage, but at great cost to your continuing development as a human

being?

You may find that you don't have to leave Christianity, you just have to transcend its early stages and find a stage four way of being a Christian. You may also find that if you inhabit the space of harmony or solidarity long enough, it will matter less to you whether others consider you a Christian or not. The label simply won't matter so much. You will know who you are, where you've been, what you're becoming, what direction you're going, what you're seeking, and what you value.

Here's what this has meant for me. To the degree I inhabit harmony, I'm able to hold the tensions. I don't have to accept or reject Christianity as the one true religion, as I did in simplicity. Nor do I have to sort through all the complexities to fix Christianity, creating my own successful form of it as I did in complexity. Nor do I have to stay in a state of perpetual skepticism and suspicion as I did in perplexity, holding myself aloof from commitments because no commitment can withstand the acid of my critique.

That's why I really believe there are ways in which we must all say a yes and a no to the Christianity we have inherited, so we can focus on the how of living of well. Because whether you identify as a Christian or not, you are still a human being and you are still passing through life's stages.

I hope you can sit with that simple realization for a while, maybe take a walk or ponder over a fresh cup of tea or coffee. You're a human being on a human journey of growth and development. Whether you stay Christian or not you have miles to go before you sleep, and the same is true of everyone else. If you can hold that simple realization with empathy for yourself and for others, you may feel walls dropping away and new possibilities opening in all directions.

If this episode has raised questions for you, we'll devote a final episode in this season to responding to listener questions. You'll find information in the show notes and how to leave a recorded or written question, and I look forward to responding.

Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.