

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 4, Episode 8

Stay Loyal to Reality

feat. Barbara Brown Taylor

Brian: In 2004, American journalist Ron Suskind recounted a conversation with a White House aide widely believed to be Karl Rove. “The aide said that guys like me were in what we call ‘the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality, and while you’re studying that reality judiciously as you will, we’ll act again, creating other realities which you can study, too, and that’s how things will sort out. We are history’s actors and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

The term “reality-based community” was born into public consciousness that day. This aide’s claim to create reality reeked with a kind of imperial pride that precedes a well-deserved fall. It set the stage for the rise of Trump, that lover of conspiracy theories, from birtherism, to QAnon, on to the big steal. As Hannah Arendt explained in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Decoupling politics from reality has a long history.” She wrote, “Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies. Their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion, fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it.” No wonder Dr. Timothy Snyder said, “Post-truth is pre-fascism,” and no wonder sage author and religious educator, David Dark said, “Sin is active flight from a lived realization of available data.”

Christianity, especially since Galileo and Darwin, has had an uncomfortable relationship with available data, but people can easily jump from the Christian frying pan into a secular fire with its own unreality, discovering that there is a fine line between ideologies and conspiracy theories and that secular ideologies from communism to capitalism can function much like post-truth religions, teaching their adherence to reject available data and clinging to ideological purity, so whether we stay Christian or not, we need to aspire to be part of the reality-based community as we move forward. We must be more loyal to reality than to our current beliefs about reality.

Barbara: The topic of this session is staying loyal to reality, and I began by telling Brian a time I heard the Dalai Lama say that “If science ever contradicted Buddhist teachings on reality, the teachings would change.” That kind of loyalty to reality is something I as Christian can only envy. Brian asked me to start with that and I just did.

Brian: It’s striking, isn’t it? In one sense, you hear that and you think, “Well, of course. Isn’t that how all of us should be?” But yet for Christianity’s relationship with science has not been so smooth, has it?

Barbara: No, and in the case of the Dalai Lama, what’s interesting since I live in Atlanta where Emory University has made him distinguished professor is that he sends Lamas over from Dharamsala to study science and Emory sends delegations to Dharamsala to learn about spirituality and Buddhist teaching. I love that that’s an exchange program.

Brian: I love that quote from the Dalai Lama and the place that takes me is that there is this sense that he is conveying that our loyalty isn’t to what we’ve said in the past. Our loyalty is to the best available data that we have. If we embrace that best available data that we have and even better data and more data comes up later, we’ll change that thinking again.

Of course, that's what we are pointing toward when we talk about the scientific method. It also seems to me that this is a theme that is there in the Bible oriented around that word, "wisdom," and all of those passages in Proverbs and James and elsewhere that contrast being wise and being a fool and this humility to say, "Oh, well, that's the way I used to see it, but now, I've got more available data. Of course, I should change my way of thinking." In one sense you just think, why would that be controversial? But it sure is in a lot of settings.

Barbara: I was just talking to Jen Hatmaker and we were talking about prayer and the ways we prayed differently than we once did and she found that such a freedom because she'd been taught that prayers had to stay the same through life, or that meant your faith had shifted in precarious ways, so the whole idea of faith on the move that takes the wholeness of revelation into account, whether it's revelations to the telescope that's now in the furthest reaches of outer space, or the new revelations in how we read old, old texts, that freshness is built into traditions staying living traditions instead of dead ones.

Brian: It really comes to the fore when we talk about what we mean by the word "God." Obviously, people use the word "God" in all kinds of different ways and often never really stop to say, "Hold it. When I just said 'God,' what did I mean by that?" It's one of the reasons, Barbara, I've always really loved your book, *The Luminous Web*, and I quote it in *Do I Stay Christian?* But this sense that people in 400 BC, or 800 BC, or 1200 BC whose voices we have in the Hebrew Scriptures, they were given permission to use the language and imagery of their world to try to describe this holy mystery and that we are not allowed to... In a sense, we show that we're faithful by perpetuating their language and imagery and aren't allowed to say, "Well, hold it. Wouldn't a better compliment to our ancestors in the faith be to do in our time what they did in their time?" That would allow us to change our thinking about God.

This idea of being loyal to reality is a really, really big deal now because of our politics and what we realize is part of human psychology that we've underestimated is the desire to be part of a group and we're willing to let things slide or even say that we believe things because group membership requires it. To get the privileges of membership, we have to pay the premium of saying what the group says, and learning how to break with our group in the interest of truth, it's touchy. I think it's why many people think, "I need to make a break with the Christian religion. I just can't keep saying what they've always said." Others of us find a way to say, "Well, no, actually, people have changed their minds about a lot of things in our history as a faith, and so we want to carry on that tradition." You have any thoughts on how we keep a tradition living and flexible so that it can stay loyal to reality?

Barbara: Well, see, I almost see that as chicken and egg because if I stay loyal to reality, then my beliefs about reality are exposed and limited and evoked and jostled around so that it's almost a circle. I have found myself capitalizing reality and trusting that, having more faith in that than I do with whatever we all mean by "God," not because "reality" is any clearer or more stable a word, but I trust what is real. One part of reality that I trust, which is very difficult to accept, is that I came from ancestors and there will be many after me and much that I pray for and hope for will not happen in my lifetime and to stay loyal to reality is to cultivate some kind of patience to go along with humility that says I do my piece, but I'm part of a bucket brigade, and it goes on before me and it goes on after me. I get so impatient to see results now, in this election, in this midterm, in this church, in this year, and that

impatience doesn't serve reality. It's not true to reality.

Brian: My goodness. I think this is really one of our struggles, a part of reality that I find myself resisting, and that is that things that in the deepest part of my soul I think are important and true and necessary and worth fighting for may lose. They may lose for the rest of my life in a lifetime and they may lose for a really, really, really long time. Being able to hold that possibility that things I care about so much will very likely lose is part of being loyal. That's a reality I have to learn to be loyal to and I don't like it. I don't like it, but I think I need it.

Something I say in the chapter, that "Loyalty to reality doesn't feel like certainty, it feels more like humility. It feels more like awe, wonder, curiosity, patient attentiveness." There is something I think a lot of us are thinking a lot lately about the allure of certainty, the comfort of certainty, and yet the downsides of certainty because one thing that's very obvious, if we look around, people can be 100% certain of something and be wrong and they can be uncertain and yet reality is going to be what it's going to be with or without our certainty

Barbara: Because it's collective, right? Reality's not only intergenerationally collective and chronologically collective, but humanly collective, culturally collective, and so much of certainty gets staked out in order to form identity, yeah? That maybe can be a both instead of an either or. We do work on individual identity and where I can do no other, here I stand, but the collective identity is where for me a lot of the humility comes from is if I accept being in community with people and imagine that I am as difficult for many of them as they are for me, and that there are with a Buddhist call "precious teachers" among us all, the teachers we would least choose are the ones we probably have the most to learn from, then that that's a good balance for me to hang on to while I stay loyal to reality, not just mine, but ours, human.

Brian: Yes. You're describing, I think, an experience that so many of us have and it is I want to be loyal to reality and I want to be loyal to my family, or my religious community, or my nation, or whatever, I want to be loyal to my people around me, my tribe, or herd, or clan, or whatever. But what happens when there's tension where I feel my group is out of sync with reality? I think some of us are tempted to then just say, then, "I will sacrifice loyalty to my neighbor for loyalty to my understanding of reality." Man, it's a much harder thing to try to stay loyal to my neighbor and to reality.

Barbara: Indeed, yeah. I'm thinking of broken families right now. I can name them, the families that don't eat well together anymore because the realities they're being loyal to are so different, so far apart.

Brian: Then comes the challenge of saying, "And that is a reality." In other words, that heightened rejection reaction, that's part of reality, and here's where our wishes get in the way. I wish it weren't true, so I don't want to admit it's true, but then comes this need to just say, "No, that's there, too. That opposition is there, too. How now can I widen my aperture? How can I learn how to see those uncomfortable truths that I wish weren't true?" It reminds me of something Father Richard often says, that "Contemplation is opening ourselves to all the reality we can bear." That's a pretty

Buddhist statement, isn't it, in some ways?

Barbara: Yeah, and maybe transcends even the Buddhist Christian wisdom traditions. It is something we have in common, but it may be human wisdom there. We're not talking about death, but I do think death is in here somewhere. I mean, we are living through death of beliefs about reality, about churches, about eternal truths that were going to last forever, and even some of us ideas of what happens when this life is over. I've been very surprised at how many conversations I've had lately with clergy and laypeople high and low about death. I wonder sometimes if climate change, I'm really perhaps deepening this too much for a 20-minute conversation, but I wonder how much death of the planet has sobered people up to other kinds, so staying loyal to a reality that's not only always changing but is always dying and coming back in some way or another, and now, all of a sudden, as a people, we're looking at a question about the planet, that's pretty big.

Brian: Pretty big. You had no way of knowing this, Barbara, but that actually is very close to the next writing project I have ahead of me. It's exactly an area I've been reading about and thinking about a lot lately, the reality of death. I think part of what's going on and causing what some people call "climate dread" or doom for a lot of people is this sense that you know what the whole human species could do itself in here and we could be making decisions now that certainly mean that life as we know it won't go on and there are some of us who every morning are waking up to feeling that to be loyal to reality means I'm facing things that most of my friends and neighbors and coworkers, and if I go to church, that parishioners at my church are really not ready to think about, and there's a kind of private agony and grief and aloneness that comes when people, they're not trying to be morose, they're not, they're trying to be loyal to reality.

Barbara: You just described the widening of the aperture that I think widens even more for people of any age who have looked mortality in the face individually, and then people of a certain age, if they're lucky enough to accumulate some decades, who begin to be unable to maintain the denial that has served them so well. Can't do it anymore and it does throw you into a sometimes lonely place.

Brian: Ironically, there is also something that happens when we at least affirm at the deepest part of our being to the degree that we can that we would like to be loyal to reality. We don't want to live in make-believe. We don't want to live in a wish bubble, but we would like to take into account, as my friend David Dark says, all available data.

Barbara: Yep. Because guess what? Reality is going to break in no matter what, so I think I would rather befriend reality earlier than later.

Brian: That's a great way to say it. Well, I think this maybe is a place to pause and say, what if that quote that you started with from the Lama is something that more and more like we could imagine a pope saying that, or a presiding bishop saying that, or a preacher or pastor saying that, or maybe even just normal folks who are Christian saying, "This is an expression of my Christian faith as well, that I want to be loyal to reality"?

One of the things that strikes me in that, when I put this into time, I imagine if we had been in a spaceship and did a flyby of planet Earth, I don't know, two, three billion years ago, we would've seen a planet devoid of anything that we would know as life, at least as we were passing by in a spaceship. This is another part of reality that I think is important for us to grasp, that hidden in that, a planet of volcanoes and boiling water and noxious gases and not much in the way of oxygen in the atmosphere, hidden in that planet was the possibility for Mozart and Bob Dylan and Steve Martin and any other number of amazing people, creative people, and opera and ice hockey and everything else that is part of our reality was not very obvious, but it was actually hidden in that reality at that point. Any thoughts on what that means in being loyal to reality as well?

Barbara: Well, it sure underscores what we've been saying about unknowing. Who knew in that flyover of planet Earth? Who knew? I just read Margaret Renkl's column in The New York Times today and she talks about how oak trees are dying at an alarming rate, and she said, "Go gather up a handful of acorns and plant them," which is a variation on wisdom we've heard for centuries, that if the world ends tomorrow, plant a tree. I love your image and I love her image of planting an acorn, though I wouldn't live to see it be over my head hardly. It's part of what we're called to be loyal to, and it's also a piece of faith that's based not on fantasy, but reality, that things are always so far dying and being born again, and if I open my aperture really wide, that includes galaxies and not just human lives, so there's some kind of communion in that.

Brian: Well, there's a point for us to pause and ponder and let that sink in. Thank you so much for these conversations, Barbara.

Barbara: Me, too. I'll be up late tonight thinking about them. Thank you, Brian.

Brian: I'd like to leave you with this short reflection from Do I Stay Christian? "As I see it, to be loyal to God is to be loyal to reality, and to be loyal to reality is to be loyal to God. But that's only true when we remember that reality isn't simply what is. Reality also contains within it the seeds of what can be but is not yet. In other words, part of the reality to which we must be loyal is the future possibility that is subtly present in the present moment."

Richard Rohr says it like this, "Saying yes to what is ironically sets us up for what if." Imagine looking at the universe in its first several billion years, swirling gases, surging energy fields, nothing solid, or imagine looking at the Earth when it was a lifeless planet of rock, water, ice, and volcanoes. Even then, rainforests, coral reefs, savannas with elephants and giraffes, cities with standup comics and Latin jazz were inherent in the possibilities, they just weren't visible yet. To see that possibility is what faith is about, not merely seeing the seeds in the apple, but seeing the million apple orchards waiting to spring from those seeds.

If this episode has raised questions for you, we'll devote a final episode in the 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.