

**LEARNING
HOW
TO**



SEE

with

**Brian
McLaren**

**Season 5, Episode 1
Introduction**

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

- Brian: Their once was a people, let's call them the people. The people used stories to interpret their lives, stories of where they came from, stories of where they were going, stories that told them how to be happy, stories that told them where they were.
- Gareth: One day, a long time ago, one of the people saw another one of the people holding something shiny. "I want it," said one of the people, so he took it. When he got back home that night, the rest of the people were amazed. "Because I have a shiny object," he proclaimed, "You have to listen to me." He told them a story about what he had learned about how to be happy, about how to have peace and security, how to keep the shiny thing that he had phoned. The first story said that the way to be happy is to rule over others.
- Brian: But every time that story was attempted, people were unhappy because the rulers oppressed them. A second story was invented. Let's overthrow the rulers. This story didn't work either because it just turned the tables putting new people under oppression.
- Gareth: Another story began in which the old revolutionaries withdrew into their own isolated spaces, unjudged the world, nothing changed. These island communities used the same old stories to run themselves, competing to be in charge, building shiny object factories that blew ugly smoke into the air, making everyone cough and dominating each other.
- Brian: Meanwhile, the domination story and the isolation story had a business merger, which resulted in an experiment. If they could get rid of the people they didn't like, who looked or sounded different, or whose customs weren't like their own, surely that would fix things. Of course, that story just led to more suffering of those who were blamed and targeted and who felt unsafe, and of those who thought they were in charge because they missed out on the gift of the rainbow.
- Gareth: They lived in a gray world. The people still weren't happy and they knew it. A lot of years went by, the people tried to convince themselves that things were okay by accumulating things, toys or nations. It was all the same to them.
- Brian: Some of the people knew such things don't heal the soul and the other old stories hadn't gone away either. The people kept hurting and hurting each other.
- Gareth: A sixth story was created that said, if we couldn't find peace, security, and happiness by ruling the world or overthrowing the rulers or withdrawing into isolation or getting rid of a minority or by accumulating things, then maybe they could make sure that they'd never forget this lack, this pain that others had caused them and the suffering they had experienced. The people would make sure that no one would ever forget that they were the victims, that their suffering was their very identity and that no one had suffered as much as them. If you try to tell them that others have suffered too, they might kill you.
- Brian: Then something new, a poet came to town, a storyteller who knew that the domination story, the revolution story, the isolation story, the purification story, the accumulation story and the victimization story were all destined to fail.
- Gareth: They were destined to fail because they invited every human being who is already interdependent with every other human being and even with the earth itself, to pretend instead that we are in a competition.

- Brian: The poet knew how to build things like tables where we could all sit and eat together. She taught that the people most oppressed by the six stories should be the most honored. She taught that the kinds of differences that the people's stories shame or use as an excuse for punishment were actually marks of what makes us most lovable.
- Gareth: She invited the people to join her in forming a new community where status would depend on service, where domination would be replaced by equitable community, where the revolution of the heart would lead us to share power with not power over transforming the process by which we lead and learn.
- Brian: Where deadening isolation would be replaced by rejuvenating silences, where we would learn from and celebrate folk on the margins where we would share, not possess and heal each other's wounds in a new story, not a victimhood or power over, but of forgiving each other. Co-conspiring only beauty.
- Gareth: The poet had a radical idea, the seed of a seventh story that will heal the world. The earlier six stories all claimed that the path to peace, security, and happiness was about winning. Us over them, or us overthrowing them, or us staying apart from them, or us cleansing ourselves of them, or us having things that they don't, or us being more important than them because of our competitive suffering.
- Brian: In the seventh story, the story of reconciliation, we still get to win just not at anybody else's expense. In the seventh story, human beings are not the protagonists of the world. Love is.
- Gareth: In the seventh story. Humans are participants in something far bigger than being reduced to dominating others for one group's gain, or the pursuit of happiness through revolutions that replace one dominance with another, or isolation, or purity, or being a victim, or gaining possessions.
- Brian: In the seventh story, humans are participants in the biggest thing that has ever happened of the evolution of the good, of the expansion of consciousness to include the restoration and healing of all things, the story of love.
- Gareth: It's a story in which some of us know that our purpose is not merely ourselves, but all of us. Some of us, for all of us,
- Brian: They killed the poet, of course. The seventh story was too much to take for people with visions limited to the narrow circle of the self, but the poet did not actually die. Her story is alive right now.
- Gareth: The story lives wherever someone reveals the other stories as failures. The story lives every time someone lives for all of us or offers a glass of cold water to a thirsty stranger, or a blanket for a naked person, or engages in sacred practices of friendship, lament and hope.
- Brian: The story lives wherever there are exchanges of power and gifts between the strong and the vulnerable, creating community.
- Gareth: The story lives wherever there are artistic endeavors that show us we're not alone, and tell us where to go next. And reminds some of us to live for all of us.

Brian: Because there is no them.

Welcome everyone to season five of learning how to see. I'm honored to be joined for this whole season by a dear friend, Gareth Higgins. Gareth, I wonder if you could tell everyone a little bit about yourself, and I wonder if you could tell how we first met. I remember the place and I remember the conversation, but I don't remember too much of the background. Maybe you could fill in all those details.

Gareth: Yeah. Well, thank you, Brian. Thank you for the invitation to participate in this with you. I am speaking to you right now from just outside Belfast in the north of Ireland, which is where I'm from and I live and work in both the US and Ireland. We met coming up on 20 years ago. It's a little bit like the British monarch has an actual birthday and a kind of a ceremonial birthday. They're two different dates. Actually, my memory is we met very briefly in London at a conference and then a couple of days later we met properly at a pub in Belfast. There's an actual date and a ceremonial date and I'm sure there will be historic monuments erected in both places. Then we've been weaving in and out of each other's lives for nearly two decades now. Your friendship is one of the great gifts of my life.

I was interested in the kinds of things that led us to meet because I had grown up in a very religiously immersed society and some of that religion was healthy and some of it was not. Of course, living through and adjacent to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, the violence that took many people's lives and injured many more people and that traumatized our entire society. At the same time, being around people who were motivated to courageous acts of non-violence, courageous acts of bridge building, reconciliation and peace. While there was immense suffering around me as a child and teenager in my young life and my family was affected deeply by what we've come to call the troubles here, I also had access and was invited into peace activism and learning about nonviolence.

The other thing I think is really important about my childhood and youth that kind of helps frame, if you ask me to tell people a little bit about myself, well, it's storytelling. My mother is a speech and theater teacher and I'm Irish. Our culture is just overwhelmed with storytelling and some of the stories are even true and some of the ones that are not factual are also true.

Brian: Yes, yes, that's right.

Gareth: I grew up around storytelling. I was kind of initiated into the culture of storytelling both in the church and through cinema and movies because they were a place where I could dream about a world beyond the one that I was living and learn about empathy for people who were very different from me. I've been involved in various things. I love festivals, I love small festivals, bringing people together periodically to experience a group celebration of life and to learn together and sometimes to lament for the suffering in the world, but just to be together. I love retreats. I'm involved with my husband, Brian Amundson, bringing people over to Ireland to learn about peace building. I have the privilege of getting to go to lots of different places and to listen to the stories people are telling. Sometimes they ask me to reflect back to them, what do

I hear and how does the story sound?

Because often, the story we're telling ourselves we're not conscious of it. If we become conscious of it, we then need to ask, is this story true even if it's not factual? What I meant by that joke earlier is that there could be mythic and poetic stories that aren't historically data-driven, but they actually reveal a very deep truth about life. I think a lot of us are unconscious of the stories we're telling. We never ask if they're true or not. We don't ask if we're telling them in the most helpful way. The decision to become conscious or to try to become conscious of the stories can actually be lifesaving for individuals and for entire cultures. That's why I love talking to you. You've taught me so much about that and that's what we're here to talk about that.

Brian: That's right. I had the honor, Gareth, of joining you twice for the retreats that you lead in Ireland. What has been so beautiful for me to watch is you bring people from around the world, but a lot of them on the trips I've been part of have been from the United States and Canada, also some from England. You take us on a tour of different sites across Ireland where we learn the history of the troubles and we learn the history and stories from people who are working to make peace. It's been so powerful for me to watch this unfold a couple of times, especially I think for people in the United States who maybe heard about the troubles or even are old enough, they remember them being in the headlines week after week. Now looking at our own country, for me as an American and seeing similar kinds of conflicts and troubles arise, often similar religious framings of those troubles and conflicts.

Through all of that, I remember I was visiting you in your home once and we were talking about non-violence and stories. I shared with you a little framework called the seven story framework. Your encouragement led to us developing that into a children's book that actually is being rereleased this fall called Corey and the Seventh Story. We shared in the opening monologue one version of this story maybe more for adults, and then we created a very simple version of this story for children. I'd been working with this over some years, Gareth, but when you heard about it, you really encouraged me about it and you've helped take it to places it wouldn't have gone otherwise. I'd be interested if you could share a bit about why this seven story framework seemed to resonate with you.

Gareth: Well, you said when you were sharing it with me, in fact, I think what you did, we talked a bit and then you sent me an old PowerPoint presentation, didn't even have any graphics, and I was reading it and feeling like, goodness gracious, this is like the holy grail. You said that this kind of discovery recarbonated the water for you. I thought that was a lovely phrase and what you shared, and as I understood it, was you were reflecting on what were the stories that were driving people at the time of Jesus 2,000 years ago, in the time and place of Jesus. I think this is also the time and place of Jesus today in terms of the universal Christ, but the Jesus as a man in ancient Palestine, what were the stories that drove people? That was enlightening to me. The deepest piece was to shift the center of the story away from I am raised in an individualistic culture as I imagine many of the people listening to this podcast have been, who've been taught to see that I am the protagonist of the story of the world.

The way you framed this was actually, you may be the protagonist of part of the story of your life, but you are not the protagonist of the world. The protagonist of the world in this framing, the protagonist of the world is love. The image that came into my mind was, oh, I used to think of life as if it's a one person show. That my job is to stand on a stage and present myself to the world and the world is the audience and they all applaud or they throw rotten tomatoes at me. Maybe some combination of both. That's one way to think about life. I would say that's actually probably a necessary step on the way toward growing up because actually, many people don't feel that they have a story at all.

Many people don't feel like they have anything to offer. They've been wounded by life, they've been raised in a psychologically, spiritually unhealthy environment. They've always been told to be quiet. For some people to be told, "Yes, you do get to have a solo show," that could actually be tremendously liberating, but it's a step or it's part of the kaleidoscope that what we're really aiming for is that there's the largest Broadway show that has never yet been produced. It currently has. There's about 8 billion people on the planet right now. Is that correct? Yeah, it's got 8 billion cast members right now, and every one of us gets our solo, our moment in the sun as it were. That's the thing that you bring to the world and what you bring to the world is not just your gifts and the things that will enhance other people's lives and experience, but the other thing you bring is your needs because your needs are the place where other people can meet you. They're the place where you also can find the humility of knowing nobody's the star here. No individual human is the star.

I might be standing out in the front of the stage. There's 8 billion people behind me in the chorus. Their job is to kind of shine a light on me. My job is to reflect to whoever's watching. This is about love. Then I step back and you step forward and we're doing a little dance with each other that that's a more helpful way to think about life than the solo autobiography. One man on a journey, one person on a journey. Who is the hero that's going to save us all or the person who's going to carry all the burdens that nobody else could possibly understand? That was the thing that recarbonated the water for me. That love is the protagonist, not me. There's one other piece, which is these six stories that you described, which we should go into in some detail in a moment, are all based on something that is real. They're just distorted responses to legitimate needs.

Brian:

What we hope to do for folks in this season is to help you develop your story literacy, to help you see the stories at work in your life, in the headlines, in your congregation, in your neighborhood and your extended family and in the world at large, to develop a kind of story perception, so that you aren't oblivious to stories, so that you aren't walking through thinking only one story is going on when there are really three or five or six going on, and you get to be part of them with maybe a little more sensitivity to the larger things going on. The way that I got sensitized to this myself, obviously, many people know this, but some might not. I didn't plan to become a pastor and author. My plan was to be a college English teacher. I was interested in literature and I loved stories and so on, and that affected the way that I read the New Testament when I was a pastor.

I remember I was preaching through the gospels and I started noticing that there were multiple stories going on, and I think I started by seeing three or four and then it grew to five and then it grew to six. I'll just summarize them real briefly, drawing from the New Testament. First, what became obvious to me is that the main actor in the story of the

gospels, I mean, putting Jesus aside for a minute, was the Roman Empire. That the Roman Empire was the dominant force and the Roman Empire had its own story of ruling and controlling the world. They called their story Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, and they would establish peace and make the world a better place. It wasn't working out so great for a lot of the people that they conquered. Jesus and all of his countrymen were living in an occupied territory.

It was dominated by the Roman Empire. This story of domination, it seemed to me, was a pretty obvious story. Fascinatingly, I'd been raised around the Bible in a religious setting and we never really talked about the Roman Empire. This story was really about me going to heaven or hell when I died. We didn't really notice the history and dynamics of the culture. The domination story was dominant. Then I realized that one of Jesus' disciples was named Simon and he was called zealot, and zealot was actually a political party. Simon was someone engaged in a revolutionary movement to overthrow the Roman Empire. When I saw those two stories in conversation, there's a lot of drama there. We have peace through being in control, but what about the people who feel oppressed by those people in control? We will have peace when we are in control and we overthrow those people in control.

That was my first two stories, domination, revolution. I noticed this other group called the Pharisees, very, very important group. What was the story of the Pharisees? Well, they were trying to figure out why we are so oppressed by the Romans. If God loves us and we're God's people, we should not be oppressed like this. They needed somebody to blame for things not being as they should be. They said, "The reason that we are in this trouble is because we have too many sinners and drunks and sex workers and people who just don't follow the rules the way they should. If we could just purify those people, get rid of them or shame them into becoming more righteous, then we would be liberated and everything would be okay." This I call the purification story, a third story. Another character who came up in the gospels was John the Baptist, and he was the strange fellow who goes out and leaves the capital city where his father is in the religion business.

He goes out into the desert, and these people are not mentioned a lot in the New Testament, but you get the feeling John the Baptist must have been part of them. There was a group called the Essenes, and it seemed to me had their own fourth story we could call an isolation story. The rest of the world is a mess. There's no getting ahead there, there's no safety there. It's going to get worse and worse. They're sort of the doomsday preppers. Let's go out and have a separate isolated commune out in the desert will live a good life while everybody else goes down the tubes. That was another story, isolation, and those were the main stories that I saw. Then, of course, I noticed another really important set of characters and the gospels were rich people and they were getting rich. I realized that, yeah, that's a story of its own.

If we could accumulate enough land and wealth and power, we can set up our own little independent zone of prosperity. I called this the accumulation narrative and then one more. This in some ways was the most obvious. It shouldn't have been the last for me to notice, but maybe that says something about what I knew how to see. That was all the poor people in the gospels. The people who are sick because there's no healthcare for them and they're malnourished. The people who don't even have a steady job, they have to be day laborers, they're just scraping by. The gospels are called possessed, demon possessed or spirit possessed people who seemed to have lost all sanity and all hope. I realized these were the victims of

all the other stories. While other people were having their stories for success, these were the people who were getting left behind and oppressed and they had a story to tell for themselves.

Sometimes it was a story that were hopeless, things will never get better. In a way, they told a story that rendered themselves perpetual victims. Other times it was a story to say, the only way that we will survive is by admitting that right now we are being crushed by others, and in telling the story of our victimization, we'll maintain our dignity. Those were the six stories that I saw in the gospels. As soon as sort of made a list of them, I think I actually preached them in a sermon. I just started noticing them everywhere in all the headlines. That, of course, set aside Jesus and his work as a storyteller telling an alternative story. Through the course of the season, we're going to be exploring those six common stories and then the seventh unique story that Jesus tells. Any thoughts on that, hearing that, Gareth?

Gareth: I'll just recap them because it's a lot of information and all you lovely people who are listening don't have the benefit of this brilliant PowerPoint presentation that Brian sent me eight years ago and I've not stopped thinking about since. The idea is that there are six stories that people have evolved that all claim to bring peace and security. When we call these the domination story, which is I will rule over you and that's how I'll get peace and security, and that's the Roman Empire or Darth Vader's intergalactic empire. It's also the way some people treat their families, and it's also the way some people operate in the workplace and hard to believe, but there are even some elected politicians ...

Brian: Oh my, hard to imagine.

Gareth: ... Who try to enact this structurally, I will rule over you and that will bring about peace and security. The second story we call the revolution story, and this is an interesting word because revolution literally means something different than what people usually mean when they say it because revolution means you go full circle, you end up where you started. That's not usually what people mean when they talk about having a revolution. There are some wonderful things that have happened in human ministry that have been called revolutions, but we think they probably should have been called something else because the revolution story in this framing is, I will get peace and security by overthrowing you and then I'll just rule over you. It might be in a slightly less bad way than you ruled over me, but it's still turning the tables and putting one group of people back in a subordinate position rather than sharing things in an equitable way.

The third story we call the purification story, which is this idea that I will get peace and security by expelling you from my community, and that might mean that I just build a wall around me so I don't have to see you. It might mean, in the worst examples, that I exterminate you, but the continuum begins with character assassination. You can just think your way into the purification story. I think we can see examples particularly in religious cultures and unhealthy religious cultures. The fourth is, Brian, what you call the isolation story, and that's the inverse of the purification story. I'll get peace and security by withdrawing from this world and I'll go out into the desert and I'll build a utopian community. We know from the history of utopian communities or communities that were intended to be utopian, it doesn't take very long before they start devolving into domination communities, revolution communities and purification communities. The utopian

community splits again because somebody else isolates from it.

The fifth story, the accumulation story, I'll get peace and security by having more things, whether it's a bigger sofa, whether it's a bigger house, or maybe I'll just invade a country and I'll take that too. Then the last story, the victimization story. That's the story that says, my suffering is the most important thing about me. It's my very identity and I will weaponize it. Okay, and I want to be careful. This is not denying actual suffering or the burden of carrying suffering. This is about weaponizing suffering and using it as a way to create more conflict and domination and violence, or using it as a way to keep people powerless and helpless because I've seen this particularly in the society I grew up in. A lot of the people who suffered the most in the violence in and about Northern Ireland were then used as political pawns, which didn't actually help them with their terrible burden of suffering that have come their way. Those are the six stories as we see them, and they are all based in something real and something that matters.

Brian: This season, we're going to be delving in each episode into one of these stories and we'll look for examples in contemporary film and literature. We'll touch on how they show up in our politics and maybe even in our personal and family and friendship lives. I hope by the end of season five, all of us will sharpen our depth perception to see the deeper stories that are going on all around us, and that will help us more consciously choose the story we want to live by. It's going to be a great adventure and look forward to sharing it with all of you.

During season five, we will be ending each episode with a short meditation or reflection. Gareth, I'd like to invite you to lead us now.

Gareth: This was taught to me by someone who might be called a medicine person. In the culture I live in, they're called a therapist. This is a person who I met at a time when the story that had dominated my life was killing me. I offer it. It's a meditation that can work for anybody even if you're having a really good day, but it's particularly for people whose stories are a burden to them or the part of your story that is the hardest burden might be the one most present to you.

It's a simple breathing exercise that other people have developed, and I'm going to share the version that I've learned. What I invite you to do is to be in a comfortable position. If you're driving and listening to this podcast, just hit pause and wait until you get home or pull the car over to the side of the road. When you get to a place where you can be still and comfortable, I invite you to let your breathing slow down, not in a way that's forced, and it's not a competition. Just allow your breathing to slow down a little more than you usually would.

Just breathing in and out, in and out. As you're breathing, I invite you now to let your mind turn to an image or a thought that reminds you of gratitude, compassion, or love. Can be a picture of a person's face. It can be a favorite scrap of language, something that you read once, something that you've heard that has touched you. In my case, when I'm doing this meditation, I'm usually thinking about a drive-in movie theater screen in the desert with an astonishing mountain behind it, and then I can project whatever I want onto that screen. It can even be a fictional character as long as it reminds you of gratitude, compassion, or love.

As you inhale, as you breathe in, let that image or thought get bigger, brighter, and clearer. Let's breathe in together and hold your breath when you breathe in just for a couple of seconds and then breathe out again. Breathe in one more time. As you do, let that image or thought get bigger, brighter, and clearer, and hold your breath as you inhale. Just for a couple of seconds, breathe out. This time, we're going to hold a breath for three or four seconds when we inhale like this and hold it with that image, bright, clear, and strong. When you exhale, send that image or thought to every cell of your being. Breathe out now, sending it to every cell of your being and breathe in again and almost be like inhaling the image. Breathe in the image with a thought and let it fill you and hold your breath when you inhale for a few seconds, and then when you're ready, breathe out again and send that image to every cell of your being.

We're going to do it one more time. Breathe in this image or thought of gratitude, compassion, or love, and hold your breath, and send it to every cell of your being. That's the exercise that you shouldn't do when you're driving, but if it calls to you, you should try it and you can start practicing it even for one minute a day, and I'll add something to it if you want to try it again later, or if you want to rewind the podcast and go back to start of that meditation. If you want to build on it to after you've sent that thought to every cell of your being, do it again and send it to somewhere in the world or some situation that you know that needs it, no matter how big that situation is. This is not magic in the sense of being a trick.

This is about uniting our suffering with the suffering of others and also, breathing into that suffering, breathing onto that suffering. It helps undo the sense of helplessness that a lot of us feel, the sense of powerlessness. Then the last thing you can do is send it to someone who lives in your house who might need it too, so that the next time you see them, maybe you can just kind of wink at them and smile. Even if they haven't felt it, it might change your story about how you could relate to them from a place where you know the protagonist of the story. It's not you and it's not them, it's love.

Brian: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Learning How to See. If you're interested in learning more, we encourage you to go to theseventhstory.com where you'll learn about a book that goes more deeply into The Seven Stories, a book for adults, and also a new illustrated children's book that we hope adults like you can use and give to children to help them learn about these important stories too. 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. A special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. If you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.