

**LEARNING
HOW
TO**



SEE

with

**Brian
McLaren**

**Season 5, Episode 3
Revolution Stories**

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

Gareth:

I grew up in Northern Ireland or the north of Ireland. We don't even agree on the name of the place, and it's a place where violence was used for political ends. Throughout my childhood, nearly 4,000 people were killed and over 40,000 directly physically injured and countless hundreds of thousands traumatized or otherwise wounded by a conflict rooted in the domination story, but met by the revolution story. I'm not sure that I like the word revolution because it's been applied to movements for the common good, but if we take it literally, it actually means a movement that ends up exactly where it started.

So, the second of the six stories of separation, scapegoating and selfishness, might be better framed as the revenge story. Having said that, I think the word revolution works as a title because movements that overthrow repressive regimes have not always replaced them with something better. In fact, unless a restorative consciousness is engaged, revolutions run the risk of merely turning the tables, replacing one set of broken relationships with yet more domination, perhaps a slightly less oppressive form of domination, but domination nonetheless.

Instead of replacing domination with more domination, we need to imagine societies and institutions in which everyone is welcome at the table. The only rule for joining would be to agree not to harm anyone. For that to happen, the table needs to be enlarged, not flipped over, and more people, the widest range possibly to be involved in making and setting the table. It's not my table, nor is it theirs. In the spirit of the Seventh Story of liberation and reconciliation, it's love's table and love as they say, love is not a victory march, but often an act of courage to stretch ourselves for the sake of something more than the gratification of our own ego or our own try.

As my own society seeks to emerge from civil conflict and violence, often the people who are asked to do more than anyone else for reconciliation are the ones who've already lost the most. And reconciliation itself may not be the most accurate term, because we were never conciled in the first place, at least not in the sense we mean when we're talking about what we usually call the real world. There's something far deeper than so-called politics and so-called society, and so-called culture going on beneath the surface.

I do find one way to talk about this, the mythic story that we came from a garden in which everything was in harmony, and that we will eventually return to that garden. I do find that story deeply appealing. We need to tell this story and we need to live this story even when the surface headlines push us to despair, especially when they do that.

These past few years, many of us have felt more concerned than ever about elected politics. It's felt like we've been living in revolutionary times, but really revenge times. Times where we pit ourselves against each other and where we believe that the only way to have peace and security in the world is to totally defeat our political opponents. But whether your team or my team was in charge or not, whether they occupy the positions of power in society, there's only so much that elected politics can do. Which is where storytellers and storytelling communities like the ones listening to this podcast come in.

Even after the upheaval of recent times, even after shocking events in the world at large and traumatizing ones in my own life, even after deep grief and depression, even after some experiences that threatened to shatter my confidence or leave me in a permanent state of

anxiety, because of the revolution story, even after a contagious concern that no one is in charge after all, I still believe that stories are going to shape our reality whether they're true or not.

So, if you want a better world, tell a better story, even about the possibility of embodying justice without vengeance. And if you think that sounds naive, I hear you, but for me, coming from a society where we actually have enacted significant generational, structural change, radically reduced the use of violence and taken some tentative steps toward cooperating with each other rather than just flipping the tables so that the people who used to be oppressed are now the people doing the oppressing. The reason it doesn't sound naive to me is because I've seen it work.

Brian: That was Gareth Higgins sharing some reflections from his own experience in the north of Ireland. Welcome, everyone, to season five of Learning How to See, where we're looking at stories. We're trying to develop a kind of story literacy, or you might say, we're trying to develop depth perception in our sight to see the stories that are operating often underneath the surface or just below the surface, but stories that are carrying us along from day to day.

And we began with the domination story, one of six very, very common stories in our world, where one group of people tries to achieve peace and security by dominating everyone and everything else. And wherever that domination story happens, some people are oppressed and so they seek retaliation or revenge or at least to overthrow the tables.

And Gareth, thanks so much for that powerful opening monologue. So many things there struck me. That phrase, "Seeking justice without vengeance." Oh my goodness, because for so many people the word justice means vengeance. It reminds me of Bruce Cockburn's song, what is it? "Everyone wants to see justice done on somebody else." And it's that idea of retaliation and revenge. But revolution, it's not like we can just tell people who are oppressed, "Just accept it and be quiet." That's a new form of oppression, isn't it? So, I thought you just touched on so many important things in that opening monologue.

Gareth: Well, you're right, if you're advocating for justice without vengeance, you're still advocating for justice.

Brian: Yes. You're right.

Gareth: And so, no, absolutely we should not tell people more vulnerable than we are, to be quiet. And absolutely there are situations where the lesser evil may be the only choice available to people. We do not live in a perfect world. I happen to think through being exposed to and learning from other peace movements and the peace movement in the north of Ireland that at the very least, nonviolent attempts at resolving conflict and oppression should be going on no matter what other strategies are being attempted.

Brian: Yes. Yes.

Gareth: And there are people who may participate in both. I don't advocate the use of violence for political ends, but I do advocate protecting vulnerable people and using the least violent methods possible to do so. But as I once heard the theologian, Stanley Hauerwas say, "If you wait until the day after Hitler invades Poland to ask yourself, 'What are we going to do

about Hitler?’ What you’ve done is you’ve proven a tendency of human beings to be reactive rather than to think about the long-term and how do we turn things before they become catastrophes?” If you’re in the middle of a catastrophe, your options are often very limited.

And Hauerwas’ response to someone asking him at a conference in Dublin a few years ago, as I recall it, was someone basically said, “So, would you just roll over if Hitler invaded Poland, if you were in Poland at the time?” And what I remember Hauerwas saying was, “Well, first of all, I wasn’t in Poland in September, 1939 when Hitler invaded. So, we’re already doing that thing where we’re speculating about something that’s impossible to arrive at a 100% accurate explanation. Secondly, I was not the prime minister of Poland, and the question being asked to the prime minister would be different than the question being asked of a theology professor.”

So, he said, “We have to ask ourselves, what would I do if I were in a similar social location at some other point in history?” And I think he said something like, “If I had been the cardinal archbishop of Munich in 1933 when Hitler was seizing power, that’s the first time to ask, ‘What are you going to do about Hitler?’ And the answer might be, ‘Well, if I’m the cardinal archbishop of Munich, I should start excommunicating every German Catholic who joins the Nazi Party because that’s something the cardinal archbishop of Munich could do.’” As far as I know, they did not do. It might not have prevented the rise of Hitler, but it would’ve been somebody doing the most they could do at the moment they noticed there was a problem. You could also ask, “Well, who was forming Hitler’s consciousness in his 20s and in his teens? Who did not intervene?”

So, it’s really about, we should not ask people who are oppressed to just roll over. Those of us who are not oppressed should be allies and should stand in solidarity with people who are oppressed. Sometimes we can do things that are more risky or that would be more risky for the oppressed. Sometimes, in fact, most of the time, the nonviolent revolutionary justice without vengeance act is all it has to be, is a privileged person saying something that they haven’t previously said in public.

It’s usually not standing in front of a tank. It’s usually not. And if we use those sort of extreme examples to make policy or principles, we’re going to be naval gazing. Most of this is not spectacular work. It’s gradual, and it’s about discerning, what is the most I can do right now that is also the least violent thing that I can do right now? And don’t wait until catastrophe occurs to be asking that question.

Brian: In a sense, each week we’re looking at one of the six stories that lead to violence and harm and broken relationships and lack of happy endings in this life. But each time we’re also pinging up ahead to look at a Seventh Story, an alternative story.

So, maybe I just want to start with this observation that these first two stories, domination and revolution, are a kind of yin and yang. Where one exists the other will inevitably follow, unless there are people doing two things. And these two things, it seems to me, are part of that Seventh Story. First is people who are seeking justice. I’m thinking about Jesus’ words in the Gospels that are, I think, terribly mistranslated

in English. It's in Matthew 6:33 where Jesus says, after talking about the mess that the world is in and how everybody's filled with anxiety about the state of the world and the economy, he says, "So, seek first God's kingdom and God's..." The typical English translation is righteousness, but a much better word would be justice. "Seek first God's kingdom and God's justice and everything else you need will be added to you."

So, the first is the seeking of justice, and then the second is the making of peace, doing the things that make for peace. And a lot of people think about peacemaking as peace restoration in a time of conflict. But what if we were to think of peace as a state, like a healthy garden that requires all kinds of nurture for that peace to happen? So, maybe we could just say that we're all going to be stuck in a yin and yang or a absolutely predictable cycle of domination, revolution, domination, revolution, unless we engage in at least those two alternative activities of the Seventh Story. Does that ring true?

Gareth: Yeah. I think what you said there about peacemaking and what I alluded to earlier with this word reconciliation, political reconciliation is a misnomer because you could make the case that nobody's ever been politically reconciled. We were never politically conciled in the first place.

And something that I'm starting to see in the north of Ireland particularly is ... Because I come back and forth from the US to where I'm from, and so you get a different perspective when you're away for a while. I think a lot of people in the north of Ireland don't realize just how much they have achieved, how much we have achieved, because what we've done is we've moved things despite ... And I know there will be people who are familiar with Northern Ireland who'd be listed to this and will be thinking, "Gareth, your head's in the clouds. This is Pollyanna." And I understand why they think that. So, let me say this as a bottom line. Things are not perfect in the north of Ireland. Okay?

Brian: Yes.

Gareth: The peace process has not been fully implemented in Northern Ireland. There are still stumbling blocks. Our government has not been meeting for quite some time because of a political disagreement between one of the local parties and the British government. That is all real. And there is still the legacy of suffering from violence of the past and the threat of violence at a lower level still exists. But if you end up being one of the people who experiences that violence, it's not much of a comfort for someone to say, "Yeah, but there's been a 90% reduction in the homicide rate in the last 25 years." Well, that's not a comfort to you if your loved one is murdered.

So, we have to find ways to talk about it that honors the universe that every human life is, but also tells the truth about a political experiment, an experiment in conciliation that is happening in Western Europe on the island of Ireland, where something that has perhaps never happened before in a democracy, where people are emerging from civil conflict with a commitment to something other than winner takes all, to something other than, "I will defeat my political opponents and I will be in charge."

What we've committed to here is collaboration for the common good. It doesn't mean that we like each other. It doesn't mean that everybody's friendly. It doesn't mean that some people wouldn't like to change that system, but this is the system we've agreed to for now as a way of emerging from our violent political polarization. And we have all looked at each other metaphorically and said, "I will not override your consent over the future of this island." And they've said it back to us. "We will not override your consent." This can be operative at the level of nations and at the level of individuals.

Brian: Yes.

Gareth: You don't have to have a violent political civil conflict to be in need of a reconciliation process, right?

Brian: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Gareth: You and I have a friendship. We haven't had much conflict in the 20 years of our friendship. Maybe we will someday. We could apply the principles of not flipping the tables. And if I can just say something about this notion of peace building as a garden to be tended to, as a garden that sometimes has overgrown weeds in it, or sometimes you realize, "Oh, somebody used toxic pesticides on this garden." Or, "Oh my goodness, there's a secret tree in this garden that we could learn from."

Father Richard says this thing that is in my mind pretty much every day and that is, "Because oppositional energy always recreates itself, the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. Because oppositional energy always recreates itself, the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better." He's not saying we should never engage in oppositional energy. There are times when we need to oppose, and there actually are times when Jesus shows us there are some tables that do need to be turned over, but not so that you can oppress the people that used to run those tables. That's about exposing and confronting injustice.

But I think what Father Richard is saying is, even in those limited times when oppositional energy might be the necessary thing to do, you have to be aware that that energy is also going to create a reaction that will be oppositional, coming back at you. And you need to be prepared for what those consequences might be. What's better than oppositional energy, maybe nine times out of 10 is the best criticism of the bad, and that is to do the better thing in the first place. To do the better thing in the first place.

Brian: Yes.

Gareth: To tend the garden, even if there are bombs dropping, if you can't escape from the bombs. I heard someone recently talk about a cellist in Sarajevo, during the siege of Sarajevo, playing their cello.

Brian: Yes.

Gareth: And someone said, "Why are you playing your cello when they're dropping bombs on you?" And he said, "Hold on a minute. The question should be, why are they dropping bombs on me while I'm playing my cello?" Okay. And that's a situation where he couldn't get out. I

mean, if the train is coming at you-

Brian: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Gareth: ... and you can jump out of the way, you should jump out of the way and take as many people with you as you can. But if you can't jump out of the way, then plant a tree. Live the change you want to see in the world is not just about confronting injustice by saying, "This is wrong." It's actually about living as if those unjust rules didn't work, to the full extent you're able to do. And that's easier for aspirational allies to do than it is for targets of the injustice to do.

Having said that, the paradox is the targets of the injustice, just like the people who've suffered the most in Northern Ireland are usually the people who are doing the most creative things to overcome it. Usually the people who've already paid the highest price are the ones who are imagining a different world and living the change they want to see.

Brian: Yes. Yes. Oh my. So, I feel like you just gave us sort of a bachelor's degree in peace studies there, but that was just tremendous.

It strikes me that in our personal lives, if we were to bring this down from international conflict and civil war and terrorism and so on, to our personal lives, thinking in terms of these first two stories, domination and revolution, it gives me a little tool for looking at tension and conflict in relationships to say, if these two stories are in play, am I in power right now? And is somebody feeling oppressed by my power? And if that's the case, what can I do about that? Or, is someone else in power and I'm feeling oppressed by their power and I've got to figure out what to do about it.

But just having this sense that domination and revolution are two kinds of stories that are very, very common in our lives, it invites us to change the question from, "What's wrong with that person?" Or, "What's wrong with me?" To saying, "How is there a power imbalance in this situation? And is there a creative and non-violent, non-harmful way to respond?"

Gareth: There's a really beautiful and really challenging teaching. Somebody said to me yesterday, "It's straightforward and impossible." And that is to learn to take responsibility for the impact of my actions, whether I intended that impact or not. And hopefully that works in a context of being in relationship with other people who are doing the same thing. Right?

Brian: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Gareth: There are places where it's just going to get you nowhere, or it may be unsafe, and we're talking about the interpersonal level, but it should be operative at the level of communities and of nations. Nations should take responsibility for the impact of their actions. Churches should take responsibility, even if they happened before anybody who's currently there was born.

If you've inherited institutional power that was arrived at through causing other people's suffering, the degree to which other people's suffering was caused by your institution, well, you're responsible for making some kind of amends for that. Just the same as I would be if I

stepped on your, this is going to sound ridiculous, but if I stepped on your toe and I realized I had done it, I'd say, "I'm sorry, Brian. Is there anything I can do for you?" And if it's true at that level, it should be true even moreso at the levels where people's lives have been at stake.

The teaching is straightforward and it is impossible to fully achieve. It's not actually, however, about beating ourselves up for not being enough. It's about how to grow into being a more full human being. It's a more rich life to learn to take responsibility. And by the way, I am not putting myself out there as someone who does this or someone who has learned to take responsibility for all the impacts of my actions. These are learnings. These are learnings. These are lifelong learnings.

Brian: Yes. Yes.

Gareth: These are things I want to learn. And of course, there is mercy and there is grace. And I've had many occasions where I've apologized to somebody and they've been really gracious to me, or I've apologized to somebody and they've said, "I didn't even know you did that." Or, I've apologized to them and they've said, "Well, listen, you want to hear what I did to you, that you didn't even know about?" And vice versa, people have apologized to me. And that's what grace is for. The benefit of the doubt is also a beautiful thing too. And the benefit of the doubt is a colloquial way of saying something deeply profound. And that is, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

Brian: Yes. Yes.

Gareth: That doesn't mean that Jesus was saying this crucifixion is great-

Brian: That's right.

Gareth: ... and they should continue crucifying people. He's saying they simply have not apprehended the horror of what they're doing. And they would never do this if they fully loved themselves, because you cannot fully love yourself and hate other people. You cannot. If you love yourself fully, you're mirroring that love to other people. And so, the degree to which we know ourselves and love ourselves is the degree to which we're not going to harm other people, at least consciously. We will always make unconscious and unforced errors.

But yeah, so that's what's in my mind when you think about the individual level of these questions of domination and revolution, and how again, we're not stepping outside them and saying, "Look at these dominators." Or, "I'm really glad I'm not a vengeance person." I see these stories in my life. I see them as tendencies I have. And they are helpful lenses for me to interpret things that other people might be trying to do to me or I might be experiencing in the world. And when you can understand a thing, it's a whole lot easier to imagine what you might do in response to it.

Brian: Gareth, I wonder as we bring this episode to a close, if you could just mention a couple of movies or other places in art where you see this revolution story, retaliation, revenge story playing out?

Gareth: Yeah. Yeah. So, I've thought about, there's three movies I want to mention that are about this at different levels. One is the interpersonal level of revenge, and that is a film called The

Crossing Guard with Jack Nicholson and Angelica Houston. Sean Penn directed it. And it's about a man who wants to take revenge on someone who caused immense suffering to his family. And it tells the truth about how revenge eats at you.

And you could also for a less horrifying story, Kramer vs. Kramer, a film about the breakup of a marriage in which the participants in that marriage, Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman, come to realize that even if they're going to end their relationship, they have to be humane to each other, otherwise it's going to cause suffering to everyone else around them, especially their child.

At the level of activism and the social structure, Selma, about that pivotal event, particularly because it shows the painstaking work it takes to build a social movement and the ethical commitment of the Black civil rights movement to not take revenge even when it'd be very easy to make a case that revenge was justified or just reactive violence could be justified.

And another film about a social movement in the UK called Pride, beautiful film about how during the coal miners' strike in Britain in the 1980s, a lesbian and gay bookstore in London decided to become allies to the coal miners, partly because nobody was going to support their anti-homophobia cause. At that time, they felt, "Well, look, these coal miners are struggling and we have time and energy and everybody's suffering belongs to all of us. So, let's come alongside that." Delightful film.

But at the metaphysical or mythical level, the question of how to deal with your violent opponents is addressed exquisitely in one of my favorite films, a movie from 1982 called The Dark Crystal, which is a film made by the Jim Henson Company, the creators of The Muppets. And it's like if The Muppets met Lord of the Rings, but its vision of where evil comes from and how to overcome it is about integrating the person possessed by evil back into the community, as long as they refuse to harm anybody, much more than it is about simply destroying your enemies.

If you want to read a book that reflects on similar questions, Alice Walker's for my money, the great American novel, The Color Purple. And then two books that are really about this question of reconciliation, one at the structural level, an extraordinarily important book by Erica Chenoweth called Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict. Which proves that nonviolent revolutions lead to more stable societies than violent ones do.

And another more recent book by Dan Siegel, the neuroscientist, Dan Siegel, called IntraConnected, which makes a case that neuroscience shows we actually are connected with all living beings at a level that can be attested to by science, not just by poetry or philosophy or theology. And I'm sure we'll put the titles of these films and books in the show notes so that people can follow up with them.

And then the last one I'd want to say would be people like Viktor Frankl's book Man's Search for Meaning, which is probably the best known of this kind. People who have suffered beyond imagination. But the work of Etty Hillesum and her experience of oppression under Nazism and her death later, a beacon to anybody who is in a pit of despair. No matter what the type of your suffering might be, there are people who can identify with that suffering and

can speak to you about the impulse to revenge and validate that impulse without validating the practice.

Brian: Well, I think this conversation where we put these two stories, domination and revolution, oppression and retaliation, we put them into conversation with each other. We just see all of us are caught up in these stories, some that have been going on for hundreds of years, that we got born into without choosing to or even realizing it for much of our lives. But here we find ourselves. And this points to the need for a Seventh Story, a different story to live by, so our lives and reactions aren't defined by these stories going on around us.

I'd like to lead us in a closing meditation just by reading some words from Jesus that I think were spoken in exactly this tension point between domination and revolution stories. They're familiar words. They're profound words. But I'd like to invite you just to let them sink in. You might want to go back and read them in Matthew chapter five in the Gospel on your own. But listen to these words now spoken in a world torn by domination and revolution stories and offering a different path.

“You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, do not resist an evil-doer, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to the one who asks of you. And do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends the rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have, do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others for do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

And I'll close just with this meditation for your reflection. That word, perfect, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Isn't speaking of a technical perfection, or fulfilling some checklist of laws. It means fully formed or mature, be mature and complete. And it's a lifelong process for us to move toward maturity in a world torn by stories of domination and revolution, but it becomes our aspiration for us to grow in the middle of these tensions and to find some new creative way forward.

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 Seventh 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. 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.