

**LEARNING**

**HOW**

**TO**

**SEE**

with

**Brian**

**McLaren**

**Season 5, Episode 5**

**Isolation Stories**

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

Gareth: The word retreat is a precious word to many of us. It means getting away for rest, refreshment, recentering, reconnection. But there's another kind of retreat that is driven by fear and even hatred, and that's the desire to withdraw into an enclave where we seek self-preservation and say, get me away from everyone else.

Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Hell is other people." And lots of us, even though we don't understand that, we act as if he was right. There have been entire communities who have withdrawn into what we might call the isolation story. They've seen themselves as a holy remnant or the elite or the chosen fleeing the corrupt or the end times.

Even today, some folk are preparing for a cataclysmic future. I knew people in Belfast when I was younger who believed as members of a religious community that they needed to be separate from anyone who wasn't the same as them. In some cases, that actually meant that they did not allow their children to go to university, lest they mingled too much with others. And in one case that I knew about, they believed they could not even live in a row house, what we would call a terrace house, because it would mean that their home would be physically joined to a stranger's home.

That's an extreme example of the isolation story, but of course, it's not just religious communities that do this. Political parties, cultural movements, and even whole nations have defined themselves in terms of what and who they are, not oppositional energy, seeking to eradicate the knowledge of the other by building walls around themselves.

But you don't need to be part of an organized isolationist community to be possessed by the spirit of isolation. We do this as individuals too. We hide, we run away. We try to get away from people we don't like. We bury our heads in the sand when it all gets too much.

This isolation story, like the story of domination, revolution, and purification is ultimately a story of separation. Separation from each other, separation from God and goodness, separation from the earth and the ecosystem of which we are a part. Separation even from ourselves. In its worst forms, it becomes violent. We may find ourselves preemptively attacking others in order to maintain our isolation.

In its most prevalent form, while it may not be physically violent, the isolation story is more than harmful because it does two things. First, it moves us toward less connection with others and therefore less community and support when we need it. And second, it turns life gray where we miss out on the gifts of the rainbow.

Jesus came to subvert all stories of violence and the harm, not to repeat them. Instead of advocating escapist stories of isolation, he sent his followers into the world to be agents of positive change like salt, light, and yeast. But even Jesus needed peace and quiet sometimes, and this need reveals the legitimate need that the story of isolation answers.

Now, the story of isolation is a poor answer to this legitimate need. It's not the need to completely withdraw from community, and it's not that we shouldn't participate in groups that have boundaries. What the story of isolation answers poorly is the needs of the inner life. Not for external isolation, but for inward contemplation.

There is a universal need for finding a space inside and tending it through practices of

contemplation that can actually enable us to become what we might call strong peace. We talk about peace as if it's this ethereal, airy thing, and of course peace has a gentle component, but some peace is rigid. Some peace is as strong as a block of marble.

We might become strong peace through contemplation even in the face of the roaring traffic of people on a city street or the bombardment of headline news on our screens or the aggressive intrusion of traumatic memories in our minds. It's okay sometimes to take time and space apart, but even if you don't have access to a retreat, which can be a privileged thing to be able to actually go on a retreat, even if you don't have access to that, it is possible to cultivate an inner life that nurtures quiet space, that nurtures roots, without ever needing to go to a literal holy mountain.

You can co-create a holy mountain inside yourself. And it's okay to form groups with other people you like or who share affinities for joyful expression, creativity, or common good causes. That's part of the enjoyment of life. I will never be part of the baseball loving community, and many of my baseball loving friends will probably never join me at a festival of Eastern European cinema. But the door will always be ajar and the only rule will be, don't harm each other.

Instead of withdrawing from the world, whether as individuals or tribes or nations, we are called to be fully immersed in the places we are. Learning to discern light and shadow, bringing what we have and asking for what we need. Our contemplative practices are always ways to being more alive in the world and more active for the common good, not more isolated in the woods and not more naval gazing.

Our brilliant Kiwi friend Mike Riddell used to say that there are two driving forces, love and fear, not love and hate. The isolation story is driven by fear of the other, but contemplation is called by the possibility of loving everyone and everything. To be fully in the world means to allow for the possibility that other people and places are to be loved more than feared.

If we start with the risk of a commitment to love more than fear, we might find that we end up loving ourselves more too. And when we exchange isolation for contemplation, we discover that it's not where you live or who you live with, but how you live. Instead of a lonely separatist, isolationist life, we can become the contemplative life of the party or the most hospitable hermit.

Brian: Welcome, everyone, to season five of Learning How to See. In this season, we're trying to develop our depth perception for stories that operate underneath the surface of our lives, and we're looking at six common stories, and then we're also looking at a seventh story that provides an alternative to the first six, or a deepening or a healing or a broadening of the first six.

I'll just mention those first six stories briefly. First is the domination story, then the revolution story, then the purification story, and now this week we're looking at the isolation story. In coming episodes, we'll look at the accumulation and victimization stories. And then finally at a seventh story.

Gareth, your opening monologue I just loved, I loved everything about it, but I love that beautiful juxtaposition of isolation versus solitude. The value and need for solitude, especially

for those of us who identify as introverts, but really everyone needs it. A place where in a sense we get respite from the gaze of others and from the expectations of others and from the demands of others.

And we try to deepen and recenter ourselves in the presence of the holy and in the presence of God, in the presence of our own deepest self and story, this healing kind of solitude that is very different from the fearful kind of isolation. And it was so beautifully expressed in your opening monologue. I'd love to hear any additional thoughts you have about that.

Gareth: Again, I think all these stories of separation, domination, revolution, purification and isolation, they're all poor responses to a legitimate need. And Marshall Rosenberg, who invented the whole field of nonviolent communication, or at least the field that is called that, he was not the first person to nonviolently communicate. He would always say there's no such thing as an illegitimate need. There's just more or less legitimate ways of getting your needs met.

And when you're talking about depth perception of storytelling, there's a depth perception or a learning, a discernment about the difference between a need and a want, and between a want and an appetite that should be filled or should not be filled. So there is a need for every human being to go deep within. There is a need for every human being to learn the difference between me and you and where this kind of sometimes porous boundary between two people are. What's mine, what's yours, what's ours? And all of it's God's.

So isolation stories arose in response to that need, misunderstood by people thinking that what they need to do is get away from everybody else or build a wall around ourselves or eradicate the others or go out and build. If we could just go to this place, we could build a utopian community and everything would be perfect. And of course, when that happens, usually it's not very long before those utopian communities aren't so utopian anymore and they start indulging in the domination and revolution and purification stories.

If we can dial down or drill down to what the actual need is, the need is about going deeper within, that can be helped by physically removing yourself for a period of time. Very, very, very few people are called to permanent hermit life. Even Thomas Merton, who I love to read. I particularly enjoy *The Hidden Ground of Love*, which is the published collection of Merton's letters.

It's a misnomer to think of Merton as a hermit who never met anybody. He was writing letters all day long and then he was sometimes traveling and he was sometimes having visitors. So there are people who are called to permanent hermitage, but very, very, very few of us are called to that. What we all need is some degree of cultivation of the inner life. Whether we can find that by physically removing ourselves elsewhere or not isn't the most important part of it. In fact, the end of contemplation is to be able to be strong peace in the middle of a traffic jam.

Brian: You're hitting on this issue of identity formation and knowing who we are as

individuals and as communities. It seems to me identity formation has this individual and group dimension. I figure out who I am as an individual, but I don't exist as an island. That's what isolation means. I'm an island.

It's not that in order to be myself, I have to be disconnected. In fact, it's only in connection with others that I can exist and find out who I am because part of who I am is how I relate, how I interact with others. It's this dynamic tension of the need for individuation without separation.

I think this is at its best what the Christian doctrine of the Trinity pointed to. Diversity that doesn't divide and unity that doesn't colonize or homogenize, but unity and diversity in a dynamic relationship. And one way to talk about all six of our stories, really all seven, is in the us them polarity.

And so we say that domination is us over them, and revolution is us overthrowing them and purification is us excluding them, and isolation is us apart from them, and accumulation is us out-competing them and victimization is us in spite of them. And I think we could say that the seventh story, the story that many of us believe is at the core of Jesus' life and message, is some of us for all of us. There is no them.

And learning to see this larger interconnected us that not only includes ultimately all people, but really includes all creation because I don't take a breath if it weren't for the plankton in the Pacific Ocean producing oxygen and the trees of the Amazon rainforest producing oxygen. Every breath I take connects me to the far corners of the earth and other living creatures, who in turn depend on water and soil and air and sunlight.

So we're all in this beautiful matrix of connection, but this isolation story in some ways is a story that says the only way we can exist is by creating a wall, a barrier of separation from everyone else. And it is really, really popular in religious settings, isn't it? There's a long history of religious separation.

Gareth: And like all the other stories of separation, it doesn't work. It doesn't bring peace and security. I think two of the saddest words in the English language are "no trespassing." And when I see no trespassing signs, particularly when they're on residential spaces, I know some people may feel like they have good reasons to have those signs up, but what comes up for me is I ask, why are you scared of me? What is it you think that I'm going to do to you that requires you to have a sign to tell me I'm not allowed in? And how alone are you?

And sure, I mean it may well be some trauma in the past led you, or generational trauma led you to feel like you need to protect these boundaries. The irony is when Scotland decided within the last 20 years to open up what's called the right of responsible access, which basically, almost all land in Scotland is available for people to walk on. So the quintessential example would be agricultural land that's farmed. You can walk along the edge of agricultural land to get from A to B. You have the legal right of responsible access, and more poetic way is the right to roam.

When the Scottish government was trying to decide on the legislation they were

going to enact, which would effectively do away with almost all examples of no trespassing, there would still be some government buildings that would have no trespassing and they would permit, quote, unquote, “private land owners.” I don’t believe human beings can own land, but people who believe that they are private land owners could have limited occasions when they could close off access, like maybe there was going to be a festival or maybe they were going to do some redevelopment work and so on, so they could limit access for a temporary period.

The fear was, oh my goodness, if we just open this all up, you’re going to see a whole lot of vandalism. You’re going to see a lot of theft, you’re going to see a lot of damage being done to the land. It turned out that what happens when you permit the right of responsible access is that vandalism decreases and littering decreases. And one of the reasons is when people see a no trespassing sign, they believe that no one’s watching if they climb over the fence. And they don’t have the kind of, the social inducement of, there might be somebody coming around the corner who’s going to see me vandalizing this land or see me throwing this trash away. Or in a more benign way, I don’t want to throw this trash away because somebody else is going to enjoy this land later on today.

It turns out when you open up the right of responsible access, people actually would proactively tidy up the land. They would treat the land with more care. And so there were farmers whose feeling was, this is great actually, my land is better cared for. And there are some people who just have a generous heart and believe it’s great that people get to use it.

I think the same principle is true when you open your heart, when you take the no trespassing sign down from your heart or you take the no trespassing sign down from your political movements. Not the same as not having any boundaries, it’s just more about leaving the door ajar and saying, okay, I’m not going to preemptively tell you you can’t be here, and I’m going to risk the possibility that I might benefit from the presence of somebody different to me.

Brian: Gareth, how about a film that you think gives us some insight into this story?

Gareth: I’m only going to name two. I know that’s a huge shock. Integrate Silence, which is a film about the Carthusian Monks, and it induces inner contemplation. It’s an extraordinary film that when it was first released in movie theaters, it played for months and months and months in Manhattan because people were hearing about it and realizing there’s a place, there’s a movie I can go to for three hours and be quiet in the middle of this, one of the noisiest cities in the world. Integrate Silence is the film.

But if you’re only going to watch one about the isolation story, it’s Babette’s Feast, a Danish film from 1987 based on a short story by Isak Dinesen, also known as Karen Blixen, about a religious sect on a Danish island who are completely isolated from everybody else and scared to have anybody from outside be there. And a woman in need comes from France, turns out to be a really great cook.

And over time the community thinks they’re doing her a favor, but actually what she’s doing is she is lubricating the padlocks on their community so that they come to realize the presence of other is actually a tremendous gift. And that if you’ve put a padlock on your

heart, that's not the same thing as having a soul that is being opened and opened and opened so that you can actually experience what it is to be here on this planet rather than you might as well be locked away. You've locked yourself in a prison if you're living in the isolation story. So that's a film called Babette's Feast.

Brian: I love that film. I remember the first time I tried to watch it, it was quite slow and you had to slow me down into its pace. And then by the time I came to the end, it was a deep, deep experience. What a beautiful, beautiful film.

There are so many stories in scripture that play this tension out between myself as the isolated individual and myself as a member of a community, as a neighbor and a community. One that really overlaps between this story and the accumulation story that we'll talk about in a future episode is a story called In the Gospels that Jesus Told. It's often called the parable of the rich fool. I think if it were being told today, it might be the parable of the idiot billionaire or something like that. It'd have to have strong language to get people's attention.

And it's a story about a guy who is rich and has his own barns and he gives a little speech. And in his speech he uses the singular personal pronoun, I, I, I, I. And the only time he uses the word you is when he's talking to himself. So his entire world has become shrunk to his own individual concerns.

There's another parable Jesus told, I think frequently misunderstood as a parable about heaven and hell. It's really a parable to say that hell is selfishness, hell is isolation, about a man who lived in a fine mansion and every day when he stepped out of the gate of his mansion, he had to step over a homeless, poor, destitute, sick person named Lazarus.

And so there are many stories about this withdrawal into individual isolation. And then there are also examples of group isolation. When you, in your opening monologue, talked about this need for healthy retreat and solitude, I think when I imagine the story of the Essenes in the New Testament who never actually show up by name, we know a lot about them from the Dead Sea Scrolls and from other ancient literature, John the Baptist seems to have maybe spent some time among the Essenes and then left.

But the Essenes were this isolationist group of what we might call hyper orthodox Jews who really fantasized in their literature about all their fellow Jews being destroyed because they were the only pure ones and they were waiting for the Messiah to come and vindicate them. And it was this sense that to hell with everybody else, we're the righteous people. As a sign of their kind of obsessive compulsive isolation, anyone who ever visits the Dead Sea, you can visit some of these Essene communities that have been excavated and they have baptistries all over them. And apparently people were baptized seven times a day as a way of demonstrating their purity. We are pure, we have to stay apart from everyone else and we don't care about anyone else.

And when I have that story in the background, I see John the Baptist maybe living among these people but then deciding this is not the way to go. And so he goes out and baptizes people in a public river as a way of... And the repentance is not to isolate from other people, but to treat other people with generosity, to give, if you have two coats to give one to someone in need.

It's this reverse, you now have an identity, but it's not an identity oppositional to other people, separated from other people. It's an identity that makes you care about other people. And of course, Jesus teaching about loving your neighbor as yourself, being inseparable from the command to love God, is similarly this invitation to true identity, but identity for the sake of others rather than to the exclusion of others.

Gareth: And how do you think our political cultures could be gently nurtured to evolve beyond isolationist oneness?

Brian: One of our great struggles today, Gareth, let me speak about the US context and then maybe you could say something about what you witnessed and experienced in Ireland. But one of our struggles today is that not only do we have these pulls toward isolation, but we have a certain kind of leader, you could call him an authoritarian leader, a demagogue, could be a man or a woman, who in a sense they know that their fast track to power is by becoming the champion of a group of people who believe there's nothing good about the other side.

I think of a well-known American political leader recently who called for a national divorce. This is a perfect kind of code language for an isolation narrative. Let's rearrange our lives so we just don't have to be around those other people. It's closely connected to the purification narrative, but this is one that wants to create physical separation.

Of course, in this country we have our history of apartheid that we called segregation that was a legally and culturally enforced isolation. And so all of our efforts and struggles that have so many dimensions, internal dimensions of changing our heart, interpersonal dimensions of changing our circles of friends, of intentionally building friendships across these barriers of difference, and then to public and political commitments that in a certain sense work against isolation and work toward a community. These are struggles going on here in my country of birth. And of course you had your versions of those in your country.

Gareth: One way of looking at the story of what happened in Northern Ireland and the north of Ireland was that we got to the end of how bad it could be. And that forced people to act, because frankly, everybody had now been bereaved. Everybody in political life had been bereaved. Most people in political life had been targeted or threatened, and there was a sense of we could keep doing this, we could keep harming each other and nobody was ever going to win.

And so that forced people to the negotiating table. That's one way of looking at it. I don't think that that's the whole story. Another way of looking at it is that from the very beginnings and in fact before the modern iteration of the civil conflict in and about Northern Ireland, there were people already building bridges behind the scenes. And so you could call this the kind of benign positive influence alongside the horrendous negative motivation, the crisis motivation to negotiate.

And that was there actually were enough people who had met each other and seen that they weren't monsters and seeing that they had legitimate grievances and were using the worst possible methods to get attention for those grievances, whatever side of the community they were from. And this place is small enough for people to imagine changing a place.

The US is so big that it's often hard for people to imagine that it can change. I would



counter that by saying, well, it's changed a lot in the last eight years because of one person's particular way of doing politics. And it can change again, whether you like that person or not. It could change again. So actually, if you have a big enough megaphone, you can change a culture or at least change a vibe.

So where I think we're at now in terms of the isolation story, there's still people who want to win here in Ireland. There's still people who want to defeat the other, but there is a deeper recognition that it has to be done nonviolently and that you cannot force a substantial minority to live in a political structure that denies them a stake in a meaningful expression of themselves.

So any future united Ireland that may happen, the Protestant unionist pro-British population in Ireland will have to be respected and not just suppressed. And there's talk about how that can happen and, because they would become the minority in such a society. So I think how you move the needle is anyone who can needs to be in conversation to the fullest extent with the person who is most different from them that they feel able to do that with. And that might be someone who mildly disagrees with you about tax policy or it might be somebody who actively hates people and people like you.

If you choose to participate in that dialogue, everybody who can should be in as much dialogue as possible with the person who is as much different from them as they can stand to be in dialogue with. And they should make commitments to nonviolence and then ask each other, what are some of the things we could do together for the common good that may have nothing to do with the fight that our political representatives are having with each other in public? What's happening on our street that we'd like to change for the better?

And when you do that, when you take those practices seriously, you find the isolation narrative starts to fall away, especially if you're engaged in contemplative practices that enable you to go out there into those places where you might feel alone. You're never alone with yourself. And if yourself is being healed through contemplation, that's the best company in the world.

Brian: For our closing meditation, I'd like to read a well-known passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and I'm going to read it twice. The first time I'm going to read it the way you're used to hearing. It begins, "You are the salt of the earth." I'll read it slowly so as you listen that first time, you can let it sink in deep.

But then I'm going to read it again and I'm going to read it, instead of saying "you are," I'm going to read it saying, "I am." And those statements, "I am," I'll read and then have a pause for you to echo that statement in your own heart to accept this identity. What's so fascinating about this passage is Jesus is offering a strong identity, individual and group identity. But this is an identity that doesn't send us away from our neighbors and away from the world and all of its trouble. This identity sends us into the world with a different kind of presence. Instead of isolation, we might call it incarnation or we might call it solidarity. So here is the passage.

"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are

the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden, neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

I am the salt of the earth. I am the salt of the earth. We are the salt of the earth. We are the salt of the earth. I am the light of the world. I am the light of the world. We are the light of the world. We are the light of the world. Let my light shine before others. Let our light shine before others. Amen.

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