



# **EVERYTHING BELONGS**

Teachers and Students

Paul Swanson: Richard has been the primary teacher at the CAC since his foundation, but in recent years, he has been stepping away from the center of the circle to join the circumference. A willing step to relinquish many of his active duties and stand shoulder to shoulder with CAC's core faculty. Out of this expanding circle, generativity ripples outward that connects even deeper to the traditions of engaged contemplation to inspire loving action. Today, we reflect on Richard's role and evolution as a spiritual teacher. With his faithful dog, Opie hovering, and church bells ringing, Richard opens the conversation with a smile so wide you might be able to hear it connecting us all together as we glean from that spirit of generosity.

Mike Petrow: From the Center for Action and Contemplation, I'm Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs.

Paul Swanson: Richard, thank you for welcoming us back into your hermitage. It's always such a pleasure to be here and get to connect to converse on so much of life and your teachings and the history of the CAC. The theme that we want to bring to the center of our conversation today is spiritual teachers and faculty in general.

Richard Rohr: Oh, okay.

Paul Swanson: So you obviously have a lot of experience of being a teacher who's gone all over the world and taught so many different things, not only through writing, but in your presence and speaking. What do you think makes a good teacher?

Richard Rohr: Wow. I can't say this is the right answer, but it's what dropped in my head. If you don't talk too much and belabor the point with trivia, but you don't talk too little not to make it not clear, I found... And I've worked at this, I don't know if I've succeeded, but if you can summarize your point in one great sentence that's memorable. God does not love you because you're good, you're good because God loves you. Something like that. It really helps to sum up the whole thing in one memorable line. So I've often tried to do that.

What else? You have to be over your early desire, which any public speaker starts as a young man, young woman, wanting to be a success, wanting people to like you. Probably like Mike Petro was when he was a young pastor.

Mike Petrow: Oh, I just wanted to be liked so much.

Richard Rohr: Sorry, I just couldn't resist it.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, that's fair.

Richard Rohr: But who does it when you're young? You need that mirroring from the crowd. Am I coming across? Am I a teacher at all? Probably that's good for audiences to know that if it's really worthwhile or helpful, let your face say it because there's a symbiosis between a speaker and a crowd. And I know when I gave many of my better talks over the years, it sounds so narcissistic. It probably is. It's because I could see on their faces they were loving it. And when they're loving it, oh, okay, more and it just comes. But when a crowd is fighting you or

critiquing you, you feel it, and you then get defensive and you overstate.

Paul Swanson: That makes sense. I think about artists like musicians or comedians. There's a connection that happens. It's the same thing when you're in that flow of-

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Paul Swanson: Of consciousness and connection and the teachings that you're trying to deliver and whether or not they're being received or not.

How did you see yourself grow into the teacher you are today? Because I imagine when you started you weren't necessarily... Have that same level of grounded comfort in allowing yourself to be open to what's happening in the moment as a teacher.

Richard Rohr: The one thing that comes back as a young friar, I can remember wanting to start with the dramatic opening, one line that already let them know I'm not going to go down the usual road, and then you would have their attention

Mike Petrow: Call that the hook.

Richard Rohr: A hook, okay.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, good hook.

Richard Rohr: I love to have a hook, and I remember it worked for me. People would say "From the first sentence, you're serious about wanting to communicate to us." I said, "I guess I am." Then if you could end it with something that appealed to the heart, so people didn't stay up in their head, as nothing new happens if they stay in their head. That's all that comes to mind.

Paul Swanson: That's great. Is there one line that you think you'll be most remembered for from your teaching? There's so many zingers, as Mike likes to call them, of your Rohrisms, of the best critique of the bad is the practice of the better or if you don't... I'm going to get it wrong. If you don't transform your pain, you'll transmute it. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: That's one that's often quoted.

Mike Petrow: Oh, great love and great suffering. There's all these sort of... You have a knack. Even your systems, you have a knack for quick snappy systems. Or just reorder... Even when you're taking other people's stuff and making it better, you really do, you make it super memorable. You give the mind-

Richard Rohr: You're flattering me, but thank you.

Paul Swanson: It's in our contracts, we have to flatter you-

Richard Rohr: Flatter the founder, make him think he's much better than he really is.

Mike Petrow: He just did it again. It's another Rohrism, flatter the flounder. Sorry, flatter the founder, not the flounder.

Richard Rohr: The one, the biggie. God let me do everything wrong so he could do everything right in me. If I were going to want a sentence on my gravestone... I saw where I'll be buried this week at the Franciscan gathering. There's no room for a little line where it just our name and our death date. But it would be something about that, that God didn't love me because I was good. Because I know I wasn't that good. Even my best things were done for mixed motives and was God doing that in you in spite of you. God doesn't love you because you're good, you're good because God loves you. The divine love which is in infinite comes first and then everything slides out of that.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting. I'm curious, over the years I imagine your audience, the students who've shown up to learn from you have probably changed. It probably looks a little bit different than it did years ago. Has that changed the way you teach the folks who show up and what you've learned from your students?

Richard Rohr: I think because I was introduced in the seventies as the tape priest because I had the wonderful privilege of knowing that a good percentage of any audience was already familiar with the way I talk and my big themes-

Mike Petrow: Because your audio cassettes were so popular and spread around so quickly.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, the early ones, the cassettes. That I had the advantage of being able to assume, and I still do that. They know where I'm coming from. They know the big field. Now, let's make it apropos to this little field here today in what I'm supposed to talk about. Jesus never had that advantage of cassette tapes that preceded him. So I'm sure, as we see even in the gospels, I'm sure he was misquoted, misunderstood, because the ego tends to hear either what it wants to hear or what it's terrified it isn't hearing. So it makes the speaker say that even though he didn't say that or she didn't say that.

Paul Swanson: That's so interesting to think about Jesus not having that advantage. And also I think about in the times of today of if you change your mind or you evolve and thought someone will say, "You said this five years ago."

Richard Rohr: You said back in...

Paul Swanson: And the ways in which there's disadvantages to both, but the risk that teachers take in holding that post of teacher.

Richard Rohr: That shows great compassion, but just great common sense that everybody evolves and you can't hold them to what they said 10 years ago at all.

Mike Petrow: Do you have any of your teachings, Richard, that you feel like sometimes get misunderstood? Is there any one thing in your many, many, many different areas of focus that you're like, "Gosh-"

Richard Rohr: This whole understanding of eternal damnation, what just astounds me is that people are attached to that. Why would you want to defend... When people say, I believe in hell, do you really believe in hell? Because it maintains the equations of good behavior deserves reward, bad behavior deserves punishment. I'm trying to address this in my book I'm writing now on the prophets. Yet, it astounds me how attracted we are to

bad news and how people will defend it. Do you realize what you're defending? You want to say, but they can't hear what you're saying. This whole understanding we have now, I checked it out with some of the friars this week of trauma residing in the body and the body can't hear logic. And so to talk to people logically when they're traumatized human beings, they can't hear you. They will defend what they already believe even though it's disastrous about what it says about God. Usually what it says about, God is that impatient?

Mike Petrow: Yeah. We see this with our students and in spiritual direction for sure. The belief in hell lives in the brainstem more than it lives in the cerebral cortex.

Richard Rohr: Well put, well put.

Mike Petrow: Some people will stop believing in it for years and still have a latent fear.

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's right.

Mike Petrow: Lives in the body.

Richard Rohr: Do you realize you still imply a wrathful God? How could God, God be wrathful? Just look through the telescope, the Webb telescope and say God is wrathful. "Oh yeah, those planets are burning up." It's again seeking the metaphor you want to maintain a disastrous universe.

Mike Petrow: So you have folks who have these harsh beliefs that are... Even if they don't cognitively believe them anymore, they're still carrying the memory of it.

Richard Rohr: They're still, yeah.

Mike Petrow: And then a huge portion of your audience is folks going through deconstruction where they're asking really, really hard questions about their religious beliefs. And you have never shied away from confronting the injustice in the world and recognizing that there's hard things we live in, and yet you teach that everything belongs, that if Jesus and the Trinity are the face of God, we live in a benevolent universe. Has it been hard to carry that message all these years realistically in the face of so many people who are traumatized, so many people who want to believe in a wrathful God or are afraid not to, so many people who are asking hard questions? That's an impressive space for you to stand in for so long.

Richard Rohr: It is hard when you see how uncurious the majority of Christians are. They don't bother me with any new way of... Even you could be preaching the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the core of ultra Christian orthodoxy, and it's [inaudible 00:14:04]. Okay, okay, get onto something real. They don't really want to be disabused of their notion of a monarchical authoritarian top-down God. They don't want that. And I'd say, "Are you Trinitarian?" "Of course, I believe in the Father, son and Holy Spirit," but what that implies, what that says about the God is not an autocrat, God is a communion of giving and receiving. But most people don't think theologically like I do.

So I know God can't hate them, but it sure makes our work hard. Your greatest resistance comes from people who call themselves deep believers, and they're deep believers in a very superficial notion of Christianity. The atonement theory being the other big example, you really believe that God needs to be paid off? God? And he can't love us? I just heard it on what TV show was it? Forgive me, it was some evangelical making this big case for God's justice demands vengeance. Oh, it does? So God is unfree? Because that's what they're saying. God has to abide by our rules of reward-punishment.

Paul Swanson: Tit-for-tat God.

Richard Rohr: The what?

Paul Swanson: A tit-for-tat God.

Richard Rohr: Tit-for-tat God, yeah. And you take them out of that, they're unsteady. It's not a reasonable universe. "I want bad people to be punished and I want myself, of course, to be rewarded because I'm the good person." They don't realize a win-lose universe is always disastrous because we can't win. If that's our goal, all it does is send us down a path of delusion about who we are and who other people are and who other people aren't. It doesn't create communion. It's got to be a win-win universe. I'm talking too much.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting though, one of the things you're leading me to reflect on is how much good theology has to be medicinal. Because you're not just teaching good ideas.

Richard Rohr: I like your choice of words.

Mike Petrow: You're correcting some really toxic ideas that have permeated our culture and really heavily influenced a lot of our listeners, not just intellectually, but at the level of permeating our nervous systems and our bodies. We carry these beliefs like scars, some of us.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. It's largely deconstructing at first of all the toxic ideas they have, about themselves, that they're not the beloved son or beloved daughter. Yes, you are objectively. And they don't like... You should see the look on some of their face. "I don't think I earned that." "No, you didn't earn that." "Oh, well then I don't know if I won it, if I didn't deserve it, or earn it." The resistance to the good news is major. Major.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Paul Swanson: I think too about the ways in which if... There's the way that trauma impacts that, right?

Richard Rohr: Go ahead.

Paul Swanson: And then there's also the ways in which a metaphor has maybe run its course where it's no longer applicable.

Richard Rohr: That's a very good phrase.

Paul Swanson: And the end of the times that may be. And your example of the Trinity Father, Son and Holy Spirit is still a metaphor for the trinity.

Richard Rohr: Yes, of course.

Paul Swanson: I was just-

Richard Rohr: And you're saying it's not true. Oh, God.

Paul Swanson: It's true beneath that, I was just reflecting upon Bruno Barnhart's, the way he talked about it as silence word and music, and to turn that on.

Richard Rohr: I forgot that.

Paul Swanson: To turn it in that direction adds more texture and color to it. It doesn't negate Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but to be able to play with that, and that's what I feel like a good spiritual teacher can do, is open new windows to let some fresh air in that make allowances for people to hear from a different way. And I think that power of the teacher can help make those deep impressions on somebody's soul.

Richard Rohr: Beautiful. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: I would love to ask you about who are those teachers who have made those big impressions on your soul? Who are the folks who have helped you see beyond maybe metaphors that had ended, or to help heal some of the own trauma that you have carried in your life? Who are those teachers who have expanded your own theological and spiritual worldview?

Richard Rohr: The first one comes to mind, I'm sure you've never heard of him. He was a French Christian brother I went to summer school at Notre Dame and I would just absorb, Brother Didier. That was his French last name. I just come out ecstatic. Everything he said made so much sense. And I remember the friars. "Yeah, I know Brother Didier said. Brother Didier said." And he's an unknown name, but he just got it. And unfortunately he was a brother, not a priest, so he never got the pulpit.

Who were some other ones? Father [inaudible 00:20:21], who I just checked online is still alive. He's around 90 now and 10 years ahead of me. He taught me systematic theology. And I remember just floating out of the classroom. He was totally Scotistic on the universal Christ notion. So he first taught me that. And I remember it was a totally new idea, even to us. Who else? I had a Father Paul, who studied at Louvain and he taught us a course that he had entirely created, and then I didn't keep those notes. I could kick myself. It was called Phil Psych, Philosophical Psychology. And he just took every word that you might use a lot, fear, love, grace, and we'd spend days unpacking that word. Phil Psych. And he isn't known widely. He was brilliant. And they wasted him teaching a small class of 25 seminarians. This guy should be at Notre Dame.

Mike Petrow: It's so fascinating to me, Richard, that you can study with these brilliant teachers, that you can read these great mystics, that you can read theology, you and I, we nerd out about theology sometimes, but things that for most people would not be interesting, appealing or understandable.

Richard Rohr: Or not even be interested.



Mike Petrow: But you hear something in it that reverberates in you and then you're able to translate that and communicate it in a way that's accessible and matters to so many people.

Richard Rohr: That's my only gift that God inspired me enough to know why and how the gospel was transformative of the soul, transformative of the mind. And to know that is that isn't like anything instrumental or... Is that the word? Yeah, that's just... Which, forgive me. Well, you're not Catholics that could... But so much of Catholic theology is instrumental and it's what makes it hard to be Catholic. Just go to your first communion and you have received Christ. Well, yes, but no. Just have the water poured over your head and you are a Christian. Well, yes, but no. Why did it become so hard to preach the gospel? I don't know what the instrumentalism is in your churches, but it's just make a personal decision for Jesus, huh? Which makes you the savior of yourself. "I made my personal decision." Oh, that's good. Whatever way you're preaching the gospel is not leading to self-abandonment and surrender to let someone else do it to God alone be the glory.

I was in *Murder in the Cathedral*, I was the chorus in college, and Thomas Becket stands in the pulpit, and of course he has to speak Latin. He's 11th century, [latin language 00:24:26], "[latin language 00:24:27], not to us the Lord, not to us, but to your name, give glory." And the big thesis in *Murder in the Cathedral*, "Did Thomas Becket set himself up to be a martyr? Did he want it?" And there's a lot in his life that gives you the impression that he went there knowing, "Okay, they'll kill me at the altar today." And you never know how much he set it up and how much it was truly an abandonment. You never know from his life.

If you've been to Canterbury Cathedral, this very spot, there's this big sword coming down where Thomas Beckett was killed because for a number of centuries in England, of course, the shrine of Thomas Beckett is the holy place to go to because you have a bishop resisting a king and killed by the king. What Óscar Romero did for us in the 20th century, Thomas Becket did. I don't think the question has to be answered. It's probably he did it for mixed motives. And guess what? Richard Rohr does everything for mixed motives too. We all do, join the club. Yeah, if you ever read the... *Who wrote murder in the cathedral?* T.S. Eliot, yeah. It's just a masterpiece.

Mike Petrow: I think one of the things I really appreciate, and that I hear emerging in this conversation, is that as a teacher, whether it's theology or psychology or whatever you're working on, it always seems to point people towards transformation, which-

Richard Rohr: That would be my big bias. If it isn't transforming the mind, the heart, and the soul, it can't be the gospel. It can't be. If it's just, "Do this technique." And I'm afraid Catholics are so subject to that. Yeah.

Mike Petrow: We'll talk about this in a later episode, but one of the things we've learned from you is three guiding questions and everything that we work on in the curriculum offerings-

Richard Rohr: What are they?

Mike Petrow: What do we want people to know? How do we want people to grow or transform? And then how do we want people to show up in the world? And that's just basically from watching how you have taught.



Richard Rohr: Wow.

Mike Petrow: You give good information, but always with a challenge for transformation and then always with a challenge for us to take that transformation and put it in service.

Richard Rohr: Thank you for seeing that. I never saw that.

Mike Petrow: You've been doing it for five decades.

Richard Rohr: It's all intuitive-

Mike Petrow: Professional ministry.

Richard Rohr: It's not planned.

Mike Petrow: I asked Richard this, one of the first conversations we ever had. I had this whole thing where I was talking about origin and teaching and how you instruct different people at different levels, and I laid this all out and I was like, "You do this flawlessly. Have you studied this? Do you do it on purpose?" And Richard said, "I just do it all intuitively."

Paul Swanson: You can hear it in your teachings.

Mike Petrow: It's brilliant. So great.

Paul Swanson: The once you try it. Like, "Don't trust me. Go try it for yourself." The way you always leave that door open.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. You guys are just... I think it's ready for me to die. It's time for me to die, that you're telling me back what I've been doing without thinking about it, but it's right the way you just said it. Yeah, thank you.

Mike Petrow: That's some good Rohrisms to-

Richard Rohr: Now as my voice gets more and more crackly and old. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard.

Mike Petrow: Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Richard is quick to note his intuitive sense, the gaps he sees in the spiritual landscape and how he offers guidance, when to fill them in or ignore them, or even to take a more gracious route. This gift of Richards is one of his superpowers. As Brian McLaren steps into the post of Dean of Faculty, you get a sense of the extraordinary gifts he brings to this position. Brian has a keen sense of the opportunities that lay ahead for the CAC and transformational learning with both our faculty and staff and students alike. Alongside Brian, Gigi Ross joins the conversation. She works with our Living School and wisely considers, crafts and supports student experiences at the CAC.

Brian, thank you so much for making the space today to connect with us. We're so thrilled. Anytime I get to hang out with you and this crew of friends and talk shop, I know I'm in for

a retreat, so we appreciate you making time today.

Brian McLaren: Listen, I feel the same way. Can't imagine three more interesting conversation partners than you three.

Paul Swanson: That's very kind. Today we want to talk about CAC faculty and spiritual teachers in general. We've spent some time with Richard talking about what makes a good teacher and the ways in which he's been able to kind of recognize his own gifts and see the gifts of others and learn from them. Knowing that you and Richard go back quite a ways now, what would you say are some of the impacts that Richard has had on your life as a teacher?

Brian McLaren: One of my mentors, Paul, said something that has stayed with me for many, many years. He said, "Learning is not the consequence of teaching. Learning is the consequence of thinking." The best teachers are ones who make you think. What I felt with Richard, I'm speaking very personally here, but I was in the Protestant world and my background was evangelical, and I was trying to think outside the box that I was given. I jokingly say that whenever I got too far out of the box, I felt like I was thinking in molasses, meaning the social belonging to a group made me feel it wasn't safe to think outside of certain bounds. And it just made it harder to think.

And I remember when... The first of Richard's books I read was *Things Hidden*, but when I read that book and then other books, and then I got to meet Richard and speak with him, and we were on the road crossing paths quite often. Whenever I was around him, I felt like, "Here is someone who gives me permission to think and he's not putting a lid over my head saying, 'Don't go above this,' or he is not putting a fence around me saying 'Don't go beyond that.'" He was someone whose curiosity and heart had led him to lifelong growth.

I think that's something people don't realize. If we could go back in time and hear Richard teaching in the 1970s or eighties, it would sound very different because he's kept on a learning journey of his own. And so that's... To me, teachers make you think and they invite you to think and they give you permission to think and they prod you to think. And when they share their thoughts, it's those thoughts enrich your thoughts. And sometimes the best thing is they stimulate new thoughts. And so that's how I feel with Richard. Plus, the fact that some people have great ideas, which is wonderful, but some people have great ideas and a personal presence that conveys those ideas with love and warmth and humanity. And that's, to me, the beautiful combination that Richard has brought. And I think all of us as teachers could aspire to that.

Paul Swanson: That's high praise. That's lovely to hear that connection point. Is there anything... You are not a teacher alone on the CAC faculty, there is a cadre of teachers. When you look at your colleagues, Dr. Barbara Holmes and Dr. Jim Finley, how do you respond that same manner of how have their teachings and their embodied teachings by their lives impacted you?

Brian McLaren: Okay, so I'm going to let out a secret here that I don't think I've ever even told Jim. I saw Jim on YouTube videos many years ago, and my first thought was, "Man, he speaks slowly." And I kept thinking... This is before I knew how to turn onto 1.25 or 1.5 speed on YouTube. And I just thought, "Come on, I wish we could kick this into a higher gear." The first time I heard Jim speak in public after his lecture... He gave a one-hour lecture, and after

the lecture I called my wife and I said, “If you took the top 10 talks I’ve ever heard, this was just probably in the top three.”

And what I realized was when I was watching Jim on YouTube, I wasn’t getting everything that comes through from being in his presence. This is not an ideal analogy, but there’s a philosopher, he died some years ago, but he was very important in postmodern philosophy named Jacques Derrida. I remember I tried to read a lot of Jacques Derrida’s books and they were a struggle. I got to hear them in person and I realized he was funny, everything was said tongue in cheek and with a joke in his voice. And when I went back and read his books after that, it made me feel like, “Oh, now I can read him because I didn’t need to take every word and sentence seriously. I needed to get the playfulness that was happening in a paragraph,” something like that.

With Jim, I realized that part of his brilliance as a teacher is that he works like a poet and it’s less important... Obviously, what he says is very, very significant, but it’s where he takes you in what he says and almost a state of mind that he induces. And so I learned how to listen to him in person, and of course I’m a huge fan of all of his teaching, but I just think turning to the mystics is an incredible gift to the human race right now. Jim has been absolutely a delight to work with.

And I had heard of Dr. Barbara Holmes for quite a while, but when I read her book... The first book of hers I read was *Race and the Cosmos*. And I just remember reading that and thinking, “I can’t wait to get to meet her.” And the chance to work with her at CAC has been a delight. Dr. B was a real academic, she was also a seminary president. She knows how to work in the academic world. But one of the beautiful things that I think she’s had greater freedom here in the CAC is to talk a lot more about her life and her spirituality and her story and her history, her ancestry, and integrate her brilliant academic mind with her own personal experience and spirituality. It’s just a great gift for those of us who are kind of theology nerds and we love to read theology.

Thankfully, I think it’s becoming more common with contemporary writers, but when you read texts of the last couple of hundred years, it’s almost like the theologian thought he would reduce... And it was usually he in those days, thought he would reduce his credibility if he brought in his personal life. He had to be objective in quoting other famous dead white people usually. So it has been such a delight to work with Dr. B. I’ll just say, of her many interests, her interest in science and integrating science, theology, spirituality, to me, this is so important going forward. That’s one of the things I especially admire about listening to her. I’m a huge fan of her *Cosmic We* podcast too.

Paul Swanson: I love it. I love it.

Gigi Ross: Brian, just to round out the trilogy that we’re doing here, what about students? Have they been your teachers in any way? I’m thinking you began teaching at the intensives for the Living School in 2019, and just wondering if what you’ve learned, if anything, from Living School students?

Brian McLaren: Oh my goodness. So one of the great things about the Living School is that we create lots of opportunity for questions and discussion and interaction student to student, student

to teacher. I think there are many kinds of questions that students ask, but there are two kinds of questions especially, where students always become my teacher. That's when they ask me to go deeper on something that causes me to think, what I said about learning is not the consequence of teaching, but of thinking. When a student asks me a question that I have to give a second thought to, I feel they're my teacher because they're causing me to think.

And then the other reality is sometimes I might say something and it goes up against something a student is taught, has already been taught, or something they've always thought or always believed. And so they feel resistance to what's being said. And often you can feel in their question, it's coming out of resistance. This always feels like a gift to me because they're teaching me about their world and their perspective and where they're coming from. And then I have to do some thinking to try to see the world from their perspective, to try to see what may seem obvious to me seems out of line to them in some way.

And there are many other ways too. I just think of especially times when we get to be in the same room and talk one-on-one or sitting around a meal table and people start sharing their story. And of course, when you encounter people in the presence of their self-revelation and their story, it brings about a kind of transformation, doesn't it, that always goes both ways. That's why years ago I was asked to be at a live event and record a series of talks, and they didn't want me to ask any questions as I taught because they wanted to have a recording that only had one voice. And it drove me nuts as an educator because I do think that learning is enhanced when there's conversation, especially for adults. There's adage in adult education, if you ever take an adult education class, they say something like this that adults learn the most when they're laughing or talking.

Paul Swanson: That's great.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, so that conversational dimension is so important.

Mike Petrow: That's so wild. Yeah, you just blow my mind. I'm thinking about all our teachers and what I have appreciated about all of you, and I love that you mentioned Things Hidden being the first book you read from Richard. That was the first of his books that I read. And I think when I encountered Richard, I fell in love with the questions he was asking. And then experienced his spiritual curiosity is so enriching. And then when I met him in person, experienced him to be just such a curious person.

And encountering Jim, Jim was walking on this healing path and mystical path and always seemed to be turning around saying, "You can walk this path with me." And talking about his teachers, talking about his therapist, talking about Thomas Merton and how they fit into his life. And then Dr. B blew the doors off the world that I lived in. Dr. B reintroduced me to a crowded cosmos where ancestors were teachers and the world itself was animated. And it just is a whole completely different learning experience.

And then, Brian, you are the consummate listener. It's amazing to me to work with you and watch you engage a student and have a conversation and be educating while learning from students, and know that the next time I step into a situation with you, you are actually going to be doing things slightly different because you've incorporated that learning. And so what's wild is to think about how all our teachers are also students with us. I'd be curious of your

thoughts on that, Gigi, since student experiences your expertise and this kind of quandary, is a good teacher always a student?

Gigi Ross: There's one of the, I forget which gospel, but where Jesus... Someone calls Jesus rabbi, which means teacher, and Jesus says, "Don't call me teacher, don't call anyone teacher. We're all learners." I know from our students, they love hearing the faculty. They love it best when there's some kind of give and take that you were talking about, Brian. And they also love it when they're allowed to share what they learned as well. So I think all three of those kind of come into play.

Brian McLaren: Maybe I could just add there, Gigi, that's such a great point. For folks who have been to graduate school, most, if you think about it this way, undergraduate education is very often lectures. Lectures, assignments, tests, problem-solving, that sort of thing. Very often in graduate school, it's seminars. And in a seminar, students have to teach each other. Students have to go do original research and present it to each other. In all my years as a pastor, the thing I loved is that, as I had to prepare a new sermon every week, I had to go out and do... Or many times a week often, I had to go do original research and then present it, which in a sense that's ideal. You're not just reading off the same notes and using the same script, you're sharing your fresh discoveries from your learning experience.

Very often, in the process of teaching things, you actually understand them way better than you did before or else you find out that you don't understand them as well as you thought, which is part of the learning process too.

Mike Petrow: That's fantastic. I had a mentor that used to say, "We teach best what we need to learn most."

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I so appreciate the way this conversation is going. And one of the things we've talked about the CAC of late is in this season of transition where Richard has been at the center and is now moving towards the circumference of this community of teachers. And Gigi, I love the way that you make sure to bring that students are also teachers, that it's a teaching community where there's this co-learning going on. Brian, I'm curious for you as you step in this role, where the leader amongst the faculty is the dean. What direction do you see this evolving, this community of teachers? Where do you see it heading? And how do you even define faculty in a co-learning environment?

Brian McLaren: It's funny you say that, Paul, because just this morning I had to give her a dean's report to the board of directors of the CAC. We didn't plan this, but I have my notes here from the little report that I gave, and maybe would it be okay if I actually tried to read a little bit of this because it answers that question even though we didn't plan it-

Paul Swanson: I'd be super curious to hear that.

Brian McLaren: I wrote, "As I've gotten more involved with the CAC over the past six years or so, I've been impressed with the immense potential of this organization. I'd like to share what may be obvious to you already, but if not, I hope I can make it clear." And the first thing I said is, "The CAC is an educational organization pioneering an innovative kind of education that combines online and in-person education, individual on-demand coursework and cohort-based learning, and student-centered and mission-centered learning." And let me just pause on that because there are a lot of schools that do incredible work, and I thank God for them.

They're 100% student-centered. And frankly, I think student-centered learning is a big step over teacher-centered learning because teacher-centered learning is we're going to learn what the teacher wants to talk about. Student-centered learning is what do these people need? And let's find a way to bring what's needed to bear.

I'm a big fan of student-centered learning, but also we have mission-centered learning because the goal of the CAC is to not just produce students, it's to equip students to participate in a movement, a movement that brings engaged contemplation to the problems of the world. And we're facing... We're alive in an incredible time right now, a scary time in many ways when we're facing the biggest ecological crisis in human history. When we hear reports of melting glaciers and rising sea levels and extinct species and raging wildfires and a million other consequences of ecological overshoot by human civilization, we realize, "Man, we have to learn a whole new way of living with the Earth." And when we realized that we could blow each other off the face of the Earth by two idiots pressing buttons, we realized, "We got to learn how to get along with each other better." When we're experiencing a pandemic of suicide and depression and aloneness, we realize we have to learn how to live with ourselves. These are times where we need a movement. And so that's the first thing I said to them.

Second thing I said, "We're not just an educational organization. We're also this movement-building organization." And then the third thing I said is that, "In order to do this, we're trying to create a unique curriculum, and this is a curriculum that has never really existed before because we are trying..." We have centuries of Catholics teaching Catholics Catholic theology and spirituality, and Protestants teaching Protestants, and there are different little silos, Protestant theology and Orthodox doing that. And then Buddhists are doing their version, and Jews are doing their version, and Muslims are doing their version, and all the different forms of each of those religions, and secular humanists are doing their version.

And here we are, we're trying to create a curriculum deeply rooted in the Christian contemplative tradition, drawing from Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, drawing from historically white legacies, and trying to end that hegemony of Eurocentric theology and welcome in the wisdom of Black and liberation theologies, indigenous theologies, queer theologies, mestizo theologies, ecofeminist and womanist theologies, all of these different strands. We're trying to build a curriculum that integrates these in an ecumenical setting in the breadth of Christianity. And then to do that, as we must in today's world, in dialogue with our Buddhist friends and sisters and brothers, and our Sufi Muslim sisters and brothers, and other kinds of Muslim and Jewish and Hindu and Sikh and all the rest.

And also not excluding our friends and neighbors who don't want to be part of any organized religion and may describe themselves as humanists rather than Christians, or non-theists rather than theists, but who all share this desire to explore the depth of human life and desire to contribute to the common good. That's a very different kind of curriculum, and it feels like we're not just creating a new curriculum, we're creating a new field. As you say, Mike Petro, we're involved in something that feels very, very exciting. And not to be overly grandiose, thank God there are many people trying this in different places, but it does feel like we have a chance to make a contribution.

And then finally, then to do that kind of work, it requires a unique kind of faculty. And



really, Richard, in a sense, he was the central teacher, and then he invited Jim and Cynthia to join him. And then Dr. B and I were invited. And what is happening going forward is that we're going to be a community of teachers, and each of us will bring unique strengths. We really hope we'll bring different perspectives. And sometimes in very deep ways, deeply different views of the world because we come from very different places and life stories and so on. But there's one way that that happens... In a lot of religious education, everybody has to agree on everything, or pretend to, or any differences they have are very finely split hairs.

And then there are other educational settings where people go head-to-head, and there's a lot of ego involved with, "I'm right, you're wrong. I'm the top dog in this faculty. You're the second tier, you're the third string, you're out on the bench." But to create an environment where we have genuine affection and respect and love and community that is enhanced by difference and enriched by our common heart and commitment to, as you were saying before, a lifelong learning for ourselves and to assist in the lifelong learning of students.

Paul Swanson: Wow, awesome. Part of what I hear in that is the invitation for all of life to be teacher from whatever context it may be. And yet in the way that the CAC is orientating, we will have faculty who are going to help organize around the wisdom of traditions and the ways that that arises not only within religions and philosophical streams, and also in student lives. That we invite all of this into the conversation so that we become this community of learners and respect the expertise and wisdoms that comes from multiple corners and not just one specific lineage that has been put in the spotlight potentially for too long at the expense of so much of the human and cosmological wisdom that's been out there.

Mike Petrow: Again, it's exciting to hear you say that, Paul and Brian, it's fascinating to me in looking at how our faculty will expand and also how we can sink deeper and wider roots into those lineages and traditions when we more authentically represent the many faces of the Christian contemplative traditions. And we get beyond the five European mystics that most people know. These are traditions that have always lived at the margins of the most exciting edges of society. That's an extraordinary, an extraordinary group of teachers to learn from. And I love this idea where the vitality is in the variance. It's not about everyone agreeing. We're exploring instead of explaining, we're dialoguing instead of defining. It's pretty cool.

Gigi Ross: What I like about especially the idea that the differences enhance is there's also a way, I think, in which faculty model for students about what it means.... The title of this podcast is Everything Belongs. And so what it means to show that there's a place for everybody in this learning community, and that there isn't one right way, one wrong way, that there is a way in which everything belongs and enhances each other. And just wonder if you could say more about how you see the faculty working together to model in that way.

Paul Swanson: Good question.

Brian McLaren: Yes. I think, Gigi, what you said about different traditions, we have these rich lineages. We have the Franciscan tradition that was so formative for Richard. We have Thomas Merton and his Trappist community that was so formative for Jim and his development. Dr. B coming from the Black church tradition and her own unique experience with ancestry in the Gullah community of the low countries on the East Coast. And then all of our individual life stories for the three of us joined together with Richard and his unique



story as a American of German descent in the Midwest and going into the seminary and the priesthood. So the four of us bring those varieties of experience.

But I'm the youngest on the faculty. I always tell people, "I know I don't look a day over 77, but I'm 67." In the contemplative community, there's this sense that there's a seasoning that takes years. You don't expect to find a... I think you can find a 16-year-old mystic. I think I was a mystic at 16, but there's something that happens when you haven't just visited a certain country, but you've lived there for a number of years. And so there is some advantage of age. But I'll tell you a place where I feel will be an important challenge for us going forward.

I think people who are born today are born into a different world than people who were born when I was in the sixties and when the other three faculty were born in previous decades. And so one of our big challenges, and this is where students educate older teachers. Younger students, constantly educate older teachers, is by reminding them that the world has changed a lot. And so in a certain sense, as many of us grow older, we have to... It evokes the old Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song that children have to teach their parents well, because the parents' world is going by. I think this is especially true now.

And then you add the issues of social location, racial, geographical, economic class, professional, just so many different social locations. And we come from a classist as well as racist history that segregates people, puts them in bubbles of sameness. And so we hope that in the years to come, we'll be able to create zones where... Let me say it this way. We'll create zones where even if we don't have the full range of diversity at any given moment that we wish we had in the room, we're helping people develop the spirit in the eyes. To use the title of my podcast, we're helping people learn to see with empathy and imagination so that they don't just see another human being and say, "What's wrong with him? He's not the same as me. She doesn't think like me." To say, "I wonder what led them to see that way." And that brings us back, Paul, to what you said, that our life becomes our teacher, and every person we meet becomes a teacher in that sense.

I don't know if that little ramble gets close to answering your question, but I think it's a great question because it reminds us that good teaching in a certain sense doesn't just teach you content, it teaches you how to learn, and then the learning goes with you everywhere

Paul Swanson: As you're speaking something struck me, Brian. I'm wondering if you would agree with this. As Richard held the post of the dean of faculty and now that's a post that you've stepped into. Do you see that post of dean as keeping an eye on the landscape of who are those who are teaching others to learn how to see, to use the name of your podcast? That is one of the central tenets of what being dean of faculty is, knowing that's a post you hold for a while and then pass on to somebody else with this idea of how do you keep your finger on the pulse and what students who are coming behind you are seeking to learn so that we can remain mission-driven students-centered in how we embrace transformational learning.

Brian McLaren: I've taken on this responsibility at a time where we're redesigning the Living School, and we're trying to think more broadly about our whole educational philosophy at the CAC. And we're trying to get a clear sense of what is ours to do in this broader emerging movement. And as we try to gain more understanding that we live in a time when traditional religious institutions are... Many of them are self-destructing, tearing themselves apart,

driving with their eyes on the rearview mirror, and our world is just a hot mess.

So what I feel my big role will be for these next few years, however long I stay in this position, will be to seize this moment, to capture and preserve the legacy that Richard has set, and to honor it by honoring Richard's example of continuing to learn. So I'll feel a major part of my job is to work with the three of you in this conversation to find and build a faculty that is a learning and teaching community itself. And to build a level of comradery, mutual respect, teamwork, and collaboration that will bring benefit to the students and all the recipients of the CAC's resources.

But of course, it doesn't stop there, because what we want to have happen is that that affects the way those people live. So they live the teachings forward in their family and in their neighborhood and in their profession and in their school. And when they go to the voting booth, and when they are making purchases and participating in a destructive economy, figuring out how to do less harm and then maybe even do some good, how they take a walk in the woods, how they honor the glory of God and creation, and how they scratch the head of the dog that they meet in the park, or how they honor the incredible symphony of the birds early in the morning.

In a real sense, we want the ripples of what we do to spread out. So that very literally... There's a verse in the book of Romans where Paul says that, "All creation is groaning until the revelation of the children of God." And in an ecological crisis, like we're in, part of what I hear that passage saying is that the whole world is suffering because human beings aren't acting like children of God. We're acting like a bunch of consumptive, spoiled, entitled, greedy brats. So if we can contribute a little bit into helping more people act like children of God and treat one another in the world and themselves a little better, that'll be a great thing.

Mike Petrow: I'm thinking about two of my favorite teachers. Carl Jung has this fantastic quote where he says, "For Christianity to accomplish its great educative task, it has to begin again from the very beginning. It's not a matter of new theology, it's a matter of people who don't even know that their eyes can see." So we have to teach people how to see. And the origin talks about the goal of contemplation being sinking the mind into the heart and seeking there for other eyes. And so I'll be meditating for weeks after this conversation on contemplation as a calling to curiosity and then a curiosity about where that calling takes us. This is just fantastic, thank you.

Gigi Ross: I was wondering if we could span things out a little bit to a more general topic, and that is spiritual teaching in general. I'm sure that you've experienced it. I know all the other teachers have. That sometimes people can project their own inner spiritual teacher onto somebody else. And I'm just wondering, how do you see the role of a spiritual teacher in general? And then how would you counsel people to discern whether someone is a spiritual teacher for them?

Brian McLaren: Gigi, that's a rich multi-part question. I want you to hold my feet to the fire if I go off on one part of it and I avoid another, I don't want to miss any part of it. First, let me say, I think for those of us who are Christians, another one of my teachers and mentors used to say, "We must teach what Jesus taught in the manner that Jesus taught it, because the manner that you teach something, if you respect the teacher, the manner matches the matter,

the content.” And so Jesus taught in parables. Jesus taught by asking lots of questions. Jesus taught by doing things and then letting the things that he did demonstrate meaning. People don’t often think of parables as art forms, but I’m an old English major. I see parables as works of short fiction, and much of Jesus’ teaching is poetry, and he loves to quote the poets, especially Second Isaiah, who was a poet.

And so I think the first thing that we see as Christian teachers is that we would like in some way to emulate not only the content but the method and substance and spirit by which Jesus taught. Jesus taught very boldly. He called down blessings and woes on people. He wasn’t afraid to shoot straight and use strong and shocking language. [inaudible 01:06:57] O’Connor said, “For people who can’t see, you have to draw in very strange, exaggerated caricatures.” Jesus uses some of that kind of language.

Second thing is that Jesus says, “There’s things you’re not ready for, the comfort of the Spirit will come and teach you.” And later in the New Testament, one of the writers says, “You don’t really need anyone to teach you because you have an anointing that teaches you from within.” And so I think there’s a peculiar characteristic of good Christian teaching that has a certain gentleness. It wants to make offerings and then step back and let people listen to the spirit themselves. Part of that is saying, “I don’t know what you’re ready for yet,” and so I’m going to trust the spirit to guide to you what you’re ready for. It’s very different from the teacher who wants to play God and make a bunch of students into his or her own image. There’s a respect for the student to say, “You are an equal. You’re probably a greater. You’re the senior partner in your own learning, and I as the teacher, I’m just your junior partner to help you as I’m able.”

And then I think your last question, Gigi, was how do we choose a teacher who we even want to entrust with some of our time? I wish we could come back next week and talk about that. I need some time to think more deeply about that myself. But one of the things I’ll say about the people who’ve had a big influence on me is I sense that those people didn’t just have knowledge, they had love for what they taught about. I think I was more attracted to their love for it than I was to their knowledge. And there are people with a whole lot of knowledge, but they don’t seem to love what they know, and they’re of less attraction to me. They have a gift offer and I’m grateful for what they offer. But the ones that I’m looking for as spiritual teachers, I want to sense... I don’t just want to gain their knowledge, I want to emulate their love for what they know. That’s the first thing.

And then the second thing is I always have the feeling that those teachers actually love me. If they’re at a distance or... The sense that they’re writing out of love or speaking and teaching out of love, that they care about the wellbeing of their students, that to me is another good sign. I’m thinking again of Jesus, remember he says, “He has sheep that he calls by name and the sheep know the shepherd because they feel his voice and he calls them by name. He speaks to their unique situation.” And I suppose when there is a teacher whose words go to my heart and they speak to my situation, I feel like they get me. They know my name, in that sense. That is part of what invites... It stirs up my curiosity to want to hear and learn more.

But again, I think of another passage from scripture in the Book of Proverbs, it says that, “Wisdom is found in the abundance of counselors.” That’s why I think we’re all... Maybe

there are exceptions to this, but in general, I think it's wise for us to try to have many teachers and many diverse teachers. I heard someone make a little interpretation of that verse in Proverbs by saying, "Wisdom is found in the abundance of counselors who all disagree with each other," because in their contradictions and in their disagreement, guess what? It challenges me to think. And the thinking is, again, what learning is about.

Gigi Ross: Thanks for that. That just reminds me that almost anything that we know or that we're learning about, we can only know one piece of it. And so that the more prospectus you can have, the better sense you'll have of whatever it is that you're being taught, that you're trying to learn.

Brian McLaren: Gigi, I think that's so important, and I think that also reminds me almost everybody who writes or teaches, they're trying to solve a set of problems. And I've noticed when you look through history, for example. At the history of Christian doctrine, for example, you see, oh, people in the third century were solving problems they inherited from the second century. And the solutions to those problems created new problems for people in the fourth century. They created solutions that created problems for people in the fifth century. When we can understand that, I think it helps us see that nobody gets the last word. This is a conversation.

There was a theologian I love dearly who died back in the late nineties named William James McClendon, and he was a brilliant Baptist theologian. He wrote book, he wrote a systematic theology, three volume systematic theology, which was ironic because he didn't believe in systematic theology. He was what's called a narrative theologian. And he used his narrative theology in each of those volumes. But in his volume... Everyone thought his first volume would be doctrine, but it wasn't. His first volume was ethics. He said, "We have to start with ethics because we have to treat one another well enough that we can become a community that learns together." And then from that we go to doctrine. He defined doctrine as the ongoing practice of learning by that community that has learned how to love one another. And then that led to his third volume about mission. And that's what that learning community tries to do in the world. That to me has been a gift to remember that this process is ongoing. Nobody gets the last word.

Paul Swanson: Brian, I wonder if you could bring us home, if there's anything that you would invite the audience, those listening, to consider as we close out this time together.

Brian McLaren: First, what a pleasure to be with the three of you. What good conversation and what an honor to work side by side with the three of you. Let me invite everyone to just, wherever you are, if you can take a couple of deep breaths. Maybe don't do this if you're driving, but close your eyes for just a second. Maybe you could bring to the mind as many of your teachers from elementary school, your first outside the home teachers and see who comes to mind. You might not remember their names, you might remember them right away. You might remember the classroom and the blackboard and the bulletin board and everything else. But just let a few teachers come to mind.

And I'd invite you to just express a prayer of thanks. Thanks to God for the gift of these teachers in your life. And thanks to those teachers who helped you become a learner. They were your first guides into learning. And it might be the one of them stands out, and you

could especially think of that one, what blessing that person has brought into your life.

When we're young, we're assigned teachers, which is a good thing. We would probably not pick the ones we needed most, but hopefully by the time we're adults, we learn how to choose our teachers. And I wonder if you could think in your spiritual life of one or two, maybe one who's living, who you have heard in person and one who may not be living, you've encountered them through their writings, or some other artifacts of their teaching. Just see who comes to mind in each of those categories.

This might be something you come back to in the days and hours ahead to those faces and names. And then to think, what was it that touched me about each of those teachers through my life? And then I'd invite us each to then think about ourselves and the people we influence, whether we're officially teachers or not. The people who observe something in us that can be contagious. They can learn from our words and our actions and our manner and our presence. Think about some of the people around you who maybe you've not noticed it before, but they keep an eye on you, they're picking up something from you. You are in that way a teacher in their life, and maybe we can pause and be truly grateful from the depths of our hearts for the gift of learning.

Jesus took that word, disciple. All that disciple means is student, and he elevated it. One of the greatest gifts in life is to be a disciple, to be a learner. And let's be thankful that we each in our own way, get to take on that name and that role. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Paul Swanson: Amen.

Corey Wayne: We hope you're feeling the contagious energy of how the CAC continues to sprout from its deep roots. As you can tell from the past few episodes, nobody's a bigger fan of this than Richard himself. The CAC faculty is entering its next phase under the leadership of Brian McLaren. In our next episode, we'll be exploring the simple and challenging questions that guide us in offering learning opportunities for engaged contemplatives and how we seek to integrate them.

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Mike Petrow: Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: Paul Swanson.

Talitha Baker: Talitha Baker.

McEl Chevier: McEl Chevier.

Izzy Spitz: Izzy Spitz.

Megan: Megan Hare.

Sarah Palmer: Sarah Palmer.

Barb Lopez: Barb Lopez.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

Corey Wayne: And me, Corey Wayne. The music you hear is composed and provided by our friends Hammock. And we'd also like to thank Sound On Studios for all of their work in post-production. From the high desert of New Mexico, we wish you peace and every good.