

**LEARNING
HOW
TO**



SEE

with

**Brian
McLaren**

**Season 5, Episode 6
Victimization Stories**

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

Brian: We have been looking at stories that operate often under the surface, creating patterns in the lives of individuals and in the lives of societies. And we're looking today at a delicate story that has to be understood with great sensitivity. It's the story of victimization. Any of us who've read Jim Finley's powerful moving memoir, *The Healing Path* will remember a scene early in his life story. He grew up with a violent and abusive alcoholic father and with a mother who in many ways was so dependent upon her husband, that had put the children at even greater risk. There's a story of Jim's mother going to Jim and putting pressure on this little boy to run to the neighbor's house if he thinks that the father is going to kill the mother. I remember as I read that and tried to feel and imagine it, it just broke my heart.

And Jim describes the experience of himself as a little boy that he both describes as a kind of psychological disassociation, but also as a genuine spiritual encounter. He is able to hold these two very different interpretations or understandings of this childhood experience. He holds them in tension. But he says that he felt, as he heard violence happening downstairs and he was afraid up in his bedroom, he describes in a sense feeling that God in some way merged with him and that God in some way let his life be protected. I think of that phrase from the Psalms where the psalmist says that God is sheltered in the shadow of God's wings, picturing God like a mother bird who protects her fledglings. This picture of being a victim of something horrible and inexcusable and unacceptable, but in some way to have your life not be totally defined by that abuse and oppression and violence. To me, that's the tension that exists in the victimization story.

The stories that we're looking at that we've looked at in previous episodes, the story of domination, the story of revolution, the story of purification, the story of isolation. These stories create victims. These stories victimize people, and very often people's lives are devastated, destroyed, ended by these stories. There's a kind of subtle but very real impact of these stories on many people's lives. We might be able to say millions of people's lives, hundreds of millions, where their experience of being a victim of these other stories totally defines them. It's the biggest reality of their lives. It really is part of the Seventh Story that goes to people who've been victimized by other stories and says, "We'd like to give you permission to not let that story be the defining factor in your life, but rather to help you see and understand yourself in some other way."

Domination creates victims. Revolution creates victims. Purification creates victims. But if victims are able to allow themselves some off ramp from that dominating story, they have an alternative in how they define their lives. Sometimes they do it through the isolation story. They try to escape from that dominating totalizing story, a totalitarian story. But sometimes there is no escape. There's no place to go, and then your only hope is to find a Seventh Story that can liberate you from your life being defined by your oppression, your abuse, your exploitation, your marginalization, your vilification in some way. Sometimes, I think we have to be honest, the only thing that helps people survive is sometimes a bitter thing, a dream of retaliation, a fire of hatred toward oppressors and abusers and excluders. But then we could imagine that that new way of coping with the original abuse becomes its own echo of abuse and limitation.

One last thing I want to say about the story of victimization and the way it works in our world. When we encounter victims of injustice or abuse or oppression or exploitation or marginalization, when we encounter them, our hearts go out to them. We feel empathy

toward them and we want to help them. We want to stand with them, we want to protect them. We want to see them liberated, but we have to acknowledge that there are people in our society that find a way of playing upon our desire to show empathy for victims and they turn victimization into a kind of performance art where they manipulate us. Just as we can be manipulated based on fear, people learn to manipulate our legitimate fears. Well, there are people who learn to manipulate our legitimate empathy and desire to help those who are victims. And when we watch politicians, autocrats, demagogues, con artists play on our empathy, we can see another form of abuse where even the role of victim is now exploited and colonized by abusive people.

So this story, this story of victimization leads us into complex and deep and difficult territory. That's what we'd like to consider in this episode of Learning How to See.

Gareth: Brian, listening to you, I feel the tenderness and as I've said often on this podcast season, I'm here in Belfast. Victimization was part of the story most loudly told about our lives, certainly throughout my childhood. And part of the reason for that was that there were victims.

Brian: Yes.

Gareth: There were a lot of people being made into victims. And actually we have a whole community in this society that prefers to be called the victim/survivor community. Some people who the term victim works for them. Some people survivor works for them. Some people say, "I am a victim and a survivor." You could say the shadow version of that victim story where victimization was weaponized was very present here. And also what you might call the more whole side, where victimhood was tended to with great compassion and with great skill, some of the skills being made up as we went along because...

Brian: Yes, yes.

Gareth: People hadn't confronted these things before. Some of the people doing the weaponizing were also victims themselves. They were traumatized too.

Brian: Yes, yes.

Gareth: Part of the problem with weaponizing the story of victimization is it doesn't just keep conflict going, but it actually gets turned inward on the victims themselves, that the weaponization of a victimization narrative keeps you trapped and poisoned. I'll give you two examples. There is an unbelievably horrendous series of terrible things that happened in the UK in the sixties. I'm not going to go into details, but they were very, very well-known notorious crimes. And periodically there would be calls for the release from prison of one of the people who had committed these horrendous crimes, decades after she had been imprisoned. And there were some people who advocated that nobody should be imprisoned for the term of their natural life. I certainly have sympathy with that view. But the tabloid press would go and knock on the door of the mother of one of the victims of these terrible crimes and say, "What do you think? Should this woman be released?" "No."

It sort of seemed to be like they would do this almost every year. My recollection is that this grieving mother, this woman who'd been deeply victimized, she would say, "Until that woman is dead, I'll never have peace." And then when the woman had committed these

crimes, she didn't do it alone. But when this particular woman, when she died in prison, the tabloids asked the same mother, "How do you feel now?" And she said, "I'll never have peace" after the death of this person. And I thought, this is tragic and it's also quite discerning, and I wish, and I hope that that mother had had other people psychologically integrated, more courageous, less selfish people than the tabloid press in her life to assist her with the process. You don't get over it and you don't transcend it. There may be something at a metaphysical level of the kind that Jim is speaking about in his book, but that's not something you can manufacture. If God mingles with you in your suffering, that's not something you can manufacture. You can take steps and practices to open yourself to that, but you need assistance.

And that leads me to the second example, which is a very famous phrase about victimhood and that's that revenge, weaponizing victimhood is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick. And yeah, that makes sense. I appreciate the person who coined that phrase. I appreciate the sentiment behind it. It probably has a lot of truth to it. Drinking poison and expecting somebody else to get sick is a bit like what revenge is like. But there has to be more compassion and grace for victimized people than just telling them, don't feel vengeance, don't feel angry, that you shouldn't have these feelings of, yeah, I agree, bitterness and rage. What we need to do, what those of us who are not currently experiencing our own victimization, we owe it to folks who are in the eye of a hurricane whose lives feel like they've been destroyed, to assist them with the healthy expression of their anger and their feelings of vengeance. Just not to practice those feelings, but to get them out. To get them out.

It's why sometimes... I had a wonderful therapist who in the room where he did therapy, he had a punch bag hanging from the ceiling behind him. And so every therapy session I would be looking at him, but I'd also be looking at the punch bag. And then there was a row of soft toys, and then there was a row of old thick telephone directories, and then there was a row of mattresses, right? Very interesting therapy room. And I said to him the first session, "What's all this for?" And he said, "The punch bag is because sometimes people need to hit something when they come to a therapy session. And the teddy bears, the soft toys, are some people want to hug them and some people want to rip their heads off." And then he said, "The phone directories, some people need something thicker to tear, to let their anger get out. And then the mattresses are, well, when you've done a good therapy session of punching a punch bag and tearing a few teddy bears apart and ripping up a few phone books, you probably need to lie down for a while."

And so I think what he's saying here, and I think healthy spirituality actually has room for anger about our own suffering, but there's a dextrous line that needs to be walked between anger and taking revenge and between I guess you could call it vomiting up the poison and drinking the poison. And so to validate the suffering without making an idol out of it is the trick here. And to recognize that weaponizing it against other people will always turn inward too.

Brian: Oh, my. So well said. Let me offer a quick reflection on a passage from the Bible and then you might want to refer us, Gareth, to a couple of depictions of this narrative, the victimization narrative in literature or film. A quick anecdote. I was invited to

speaking at a large clergy conference once and the theme was a passage from Psalm 137. The theme for the conference was Singing the Lord's Song in a Foreign Land. So we went through the week and then they had a final Eucharistic service at the end where I was asked to preach. And I thought of the whole Psalm and I thought we're conveniently looking at a very pretty phrase in Psalm 137, but when you get to the end of Psalm 137, there's a phrase that's not so pretty. I'm going to read it. It's horrible to even read, but I'm going to read. At the end of Psalm 137 it says, "Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction. Happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

And obviously that's not a verse that you normally build a clergy conference around, but I felt that it had to be mentioned in this closing sermon. And what I tried to explain to people is that the fact that that Psalm exists in the Bible becomes a permission slip for some people to feel that revenge is legitimate. After all it's in the Bible. And even to picture God as a God of vengeance who delights in torturing people in revenge for their offenses. But I said, maybe when we abuse that Psalm, it gives us a chance to then properly use it. And that is to say, we need to understand that when people have been... In this case, it's the domination story. Babylon had come in and invaded and kidnapped people and humiliated people and terrified and terrorized people. And this is a natural response. This is how people feel when they've been victimized. And I think this is the delicate balance that we walk trying to hold this tension.

And even though in one way I wish that we could edit the Bible and get Psalm 137, at least that part of it out, that would be another form of abuse in a certain way because it would be a way of saying a little bit like telling people shut up. Don't say that sort of thing. No, we have to acknowledge the rage and terror and horror and fury that people feel when they've been made victims. And your stories there from Ireland I think also help us hold that deep tension.

Gareth: I think you're absolutely right. And the Bible's expressions of the range of human emotions is far broader than what's allowed, well in the average culture. Nevermind the average religious setting. And a healthy religious setting would make room for the expression of a kaleidoscope, from lament through to celebration. And one thing I think we could do well to do, is to let the word should disappear from this discourse of victimization. When we're alongside someone who is in the crucible of suffering, let go of should and just say, "I'm going to sit with you in this as best I can." I had someone say to me at a moment of great distress in my life, "I don't know what the answer is, but I will sit with you in the ashes." And he did. He sat with me in the ashes and I came through the ashes and there'll probably be ashes again.

But what I don't want to do to others or have done to me is to re-victimize them through my story about grace and to tell someone well, because somebody else experienced grace or had some healing, that they should feel that too. Often these stories we tell took a lot longer than the way the story sounds or it's a decades-long journey. Or we go two steps forward and one step back. One more piece about that before I name some recommendations from maybe some other forms of culture is I've

thought for a long time there should be two versions of social media like Facebook. There should be the public version in which we only publish the highest possible version of what we have to say on that given day, that we would treat it as if we were publishing a book that had been responded to by feedback through wise mentors and that we would put out into the world the best of us or if we were performing on a stage.

And that there could be another private social media where we can rant about all the unexpurgated feelings that we have, but they only get seen by our mentors or our therapists or our priests and pastors who can respond by saying, “Okay, Brian. Okay, Gareth. Yep, I see you’re having a bad day. We’re not going to publish that for the world to see. We’re going to let that out of you. That’s going to come out of you. And then, okay, what do you really want to say to the world? What do you really want to say to the world? What do you really feel the world needs to hear?”

So a couple of movies that I think address this question of victimization. If there’s only one that I would encourage you to see, it’s the Fisher King, which is just an exquisite film about a man who suffers some of the worst things you can imagine happening to somebody and who really loses his mind for a period of time. And his path to wholeness involves literally recruiting somebody who was complicit in his suffering to do a task on his behalf. It’s a mythic task set in modern day New York, and I find it intensely moving to watch the journey of these two men and the women who are courageously nurturing, supporting and challenging them the whole way along. That’s the Fisher King.

And then two others, the Duelists. That’s D-U-E-L as in a duel being fought between two people who have made an idol out of the concept of honor. And that’s a film in which one character pursues another one for years across Europe during the Napoleonic Wars to force him to fight a duel because he can’t let go of this misguided sense of honor. And that’s a story about how we might be able to help people who are making victims of themselves by their desperation to get revenge. And the last one is from 1960, The Apartment with Shirley MacLaine and Jack Lemmon, which is about two people who are mistreated by pretty much everyone else in the movie and refuse. At the end of the film they have learned to refuse to accept the oppression that other people are putting on them. They’re not interested in revenge, they’re just interested in getting on with their lives.

If you want to explore more stories of contemporary victimization in the real world other than the movie world, I want to recommend something, a project I was involved in that was... The lead author on it was actor in the parish and the website is called Compromise after Conflict, compromiseafterconflict.org. And these are first person stories from South Africa, from Sri Lanka and from Northern Ireland of people who suffered greatly and have been involved in compromise and their voices speak far more than I could say right now about transforming the victimization story.

Brian: Well, this story, we’re only scratching the surface. We could talk about all kinds of permutations of what happens in this story as people who were victimized and then considered themselves rightly innocent victims, then can end up being in a certain sense, blinded by their presumption of innocence to then inflict harm on others. This is a pattern we see in history. There’s even something that I’ve written about and others have talked about called The Cult of Innocence, where this pursuit of innocence leads people to, in a

sense, abuse the idea of being a victim. So, so much we could say about this story. But when we develop the sensitivity to see this story at work in the world, I think it helps us inhabit our own role as a character in this story that's unfolding and maybe even align ourselves with a protagonist of love. I'd like to lead us in a meditation in closing by offering an interpretation of a well-known passage from the gospels. We call it the Beatitudes.

And I have the wonderful priest and activist John Dear to thank for this basic understanding. You'll recall the Beatitudes are a set of statements built around the words blessed are. And it seems to me one way... There's many ways that this passage is understood, but one way to understand this is that Jesus is looking at the victims in the world and he is saying the start of this movement, I'm starting. At the core of this new story that I'm telling, is a desire to bless the victims. And so I'll offer just a slow reading of this text and maybe you can join Jesus and me as I read in offering a blessing to people who are often forgotten and pushed aside and victimized.

He begins. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke's version just says, "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You might understand blessed are the poor in spirit to mean those, the poor, and those in solidarity with the poor. "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." People mourn when they've lost a loved one, and very often these are people who are experiencing a story of domination or in some realm of revolution or purification. "Blessed are those who mourn." "Blessed are the meek." The meek means the nonviolent. Those who don't want to play a part in the stories that so often dominate our world. "Blessed are the meek," the nonviolent, the gentle, "for they will inherit the earth." "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled every day." They have a reason to feel this world is so unjust and they hunger and thirst and we bless those people. "Blessed are the merciful," those who are not responding to harm with a desire to harm and return, "for they will receive mercy."

"Blessed are the pure in heart," not the con artists, not the deceivers, not the manipulators. Those who have a purity of heart, "for they will see God." "Blessed are the peacemakers," those living by a different story, "for they will be called children of God." "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And "Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets, those who stood for justice before you." Amen.

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