

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 5, Episode 7
Accumulation Stories

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

Gareth Higgins: This is a story about money and fear. It's a story about being possessed by things rather than enjoying and sharing them. And it's a story nested within a bigger story about how sometimes when we think we have more, we actually have less. It is said that married or partnered people may have more conflicts about money than anything else. Neighbors have conflict about fences. Nations have conflict about territory. But whether it's bigger sofas or bigger houses or bigger jobs or bigger bank accounts or reputation or ego or a bigger empire, we don't have to look too far to find the accumulation story at work. The story that says we will achieve peace and security through having more things. It's an expansionist narrative, but it doesn't expand peace and security. Nevermind enhance the experience of soulfulness. There's a reason people say, "If you love someone, you should set them free."

This is true of objects and numbers to. When we try to hold too tightly to things, we make them into idols. There's a reason Jesus responded to the rich young ruler asking, "What must I do to be saved?" By saying, "Sell all you have and give it to the poor, because love of money and being possessed by things is a root of all kinds of evil." There's a reason I'm told that if you were visiting Dorothy Day at home and she saw that you appreciated some beautiful object she had in her house, she might just give it to you, because stewardship of beauty and sharing things in community is more life-giving than trying to keep things locked away. I had a friend who told me this story about a man from Tuscany, a man with a big family and a big heart who was known most of all for his big love of that beautiful land.

On his deathbed, he asked to be carried to the hill overlooking his village with some olive trees nestled in a small valley beneath exquisite and perfectly sized mountains. He gazed upon the streets and houses where he had been born and raised where he had learned and played, prayed and served. He looked over to the mountain and down the valley. He looked at the faces of his loved ones and he felt grateful for them, but angry that his life in the beautiful land of Tuscany that he loved so much was ending. He did not want to leave this place. With his dying breath, he reached down to the soft and crumbly burnt orange clay on the hill and grabbed a handful. The last words his family heard him say through gritted teeth were, "You will not take Tuscany away from me." When he died and found himself on the other side of the veil, the gates opened and an angel appeared beckoning him with a smile to enter.

He was surprised to find himself able to walk with more energy and breathe more smoothly than he had in years. So he approached the entrance to heaven with a confidence he had not expected. But then the angel saw the clay in his hand and shook her head, "You can't bring that in here, friend," she said/ "But you will not take Tuscany away from me," the man responded. "Well, you can't bring it in here, I'm afraid," said the angel. So the man wandered away and sat on a rock. He opened his hand and he just stared at the beautiful clay of Tuscany on the outside of heaven. About six months went by and the angel returned offering him another opportunity to come in, "But you can't bring Tuscany with you," she gently reminded him. "Well, I'll just stay here then," he responded. A decade passed before the angel decided to give it another try, but the answer was the same.

And this time our friend insisted in a loud voice, "You will not separate me from the clay of Tuscany." The angel and her senior management team regrouped for a facilitated feedback session on the other side of the gate. "We might need to try plan B," they agreed. So to give the man more time to reflect on what really matters, they let another century pass before

trying their rarest trick. This time the angel went out accompanied by our friend's favorite grandchild. Seeing her after all these years, the man staggered to his feet and stumbled as fast as he could to reach her. He was over 200 years old now, so it was more of a stumble than a run. But when she reached out to hug him, he was boosted by the vigor that comes from love reawakened. He opened his arms, picked her up, spun her around and exclaimed his delight at seeing her.

The angel standing just a few paces away caught his eye and gestured to the ground where our friend to his horror realized he had dropped the clay from the beautiful land of Tuscany, which was now being blown by a gust of wind that had just happened to present itself at that moment. It was hopeless. The burnt orange Tuscan clay was now indistinguishable from the dust of heaven's waiting room, and within moments it would disappear completely. Our friend was downcast, but his grandchild extended her hand and said, "We miss you in there." So he trudged, exhausted by decades of trying to hold on to what he could not keep, broken spirited by the loss of his home, the beautiful land of Tuscany. But his granddaughter was with him and soon he would see his family again, and this angel seemed pretty decent too. So when he reached the gate and the angel pointed at the handle and his grandchild let go of his hand, he saw that they were not able to open the door for him.

He would have to do it himself, otherwise it wouldn't be a choice. So he turned the handle gingerly and took one last look at the rock where he had spent the first part of his afterlife, and where he had tended the clay of the beautiful land of Tuscany for so long. He closed his eyes and kept them closed even as he walked through the gate. And when the gate closed behind him and he opened his eyes, he saw everyone he had ever loved and who had ever loved him. He saw his village in a small valley with some olive trees surrounded by exquisite and perfectly sized mountains. He saw that he was in for the first time, the beautiful land of Tuscany.

Brian McLaren: Welcome everyone to Season Five of Learning How To See. We're going through a series of stories that we hope you'll learn to have some depth perception of so you can see these stories at work in our world and in your life. In this episode we're talking about the story of accumulation. This story interacts with any number of other stories, domination, revolution, purification, isolation, victimization and accumulation plays an important role. Gareth, the story you told us in that opening monologue was just beautiful and moving and touching. And I have to admit a little bit terrifying too. And I'll tell you why, because I couldn't help but think we're having this conversation in the aftermath of the hottest month recorded in over 125,000 years, and thinking about the loss of the earth, not just the red clay of Tuscany, but thinking about how the accumulation narrative makes people lose the earth and all that. Anyhow, that had a profound effect on me as I was listening to this story. Tell me more about where that story came from and additional thoughts you have about this accumulation narrative.

Gareth Higgins: Well, I heard that story from someone who was a friend of yours and mine. I've already mentioned in this season that it's Mike Riddell from [inaudible 00:09:31], New Zealand. You could kill the story by trying to explain it too much. But what you just said there about isn't it ironic that the desire to accumulate things which is connected to the desire to hold on to things is actually what destroys them. It's actually what destroys them. And the little mention I made of Dorothy Day was a story I'd heard from somebody else. It's

a misnomer to think that Dorothy Day didn't like beautiful things.

There's a kind of a myth that people who are conscious about the needs of the poor are all really unhappy and have to be making themselves suffer even more. Actually, that's just not true. It's not true in the history of spiritually oriented activism, and frankly, some of the places where the most sharing takes place are the spaces in which the most beleaguerment, if that's a word, is also occurring. So the story I heard was that if you were in Dorothy Day's house and she saw that you really liked something that she had, she'd be like, "Well, you should take it. It looks like you like it more than I do."

And then pass it on to someone else, share it. Let this stuff circulate or tend to it well. Care for it well. It's one of the things I like about free museums funded by philanthropy, instead of someone who buys a painting for \$200 million and locks it in a vault so that a decade from now they can sell it for more money to someone else who will lock it in a vault. But you don't have to be a billionaire philanthropist to share with the world. It seems to me that love of money seems to go hand in hand with using people. I've been lucky, not too many, but I've worked in environments when I wasn't treated like a human being. And I've observed environments in which a celebration of life is underway. I met somebody last year who co-owns a business that has 700 employees, and we were having dinner with him at one of his restaurants. And during the meal, about seven of the serving staff came to the table just to say hello.

Every single one of them, this man introduced us to by name and told us something about their life. And after about the seventh employee had left, I turned to this man who's quite powerful and quite well-known. I said to him, "You know all their names?" And he looked at me like I was insane and said, "They're people. They're people, man." And that seemed like an echo of one more short story that I'll share really short.

There's a story about an anthropologist, I think in the 1930s who studying a group of people from the West hadn't really encountered before. And this was a hunter-gatherer community, and she got to witness one of the major hunts of the year. And at the end of the hunt, the kind of leader of the tribe was distributing the meat from the hunt to all the villagers. And this anthropologist was perturbed and confused by this, and she thought maybe he just needs to learn about modern refrigeration techniques so that he can keep this meat for himself. He hunted it, it's his meat. And she tried to talk with him about this and he didn't understand what she was referring to. The concept just didn't compute. And so he said to her eventually, "I store my meat in the belly of my friends."

And he meant, "There'll come a time when I can't hunt anymore or there may come a time when it's not a good hunting season, but these people will take care of me partly because I took care of them." But that makes it sound more kind of transactional than it actually is. Another friend of ours, Alistair Macintosh, the Scottish Eco theologian, talks about growing up on the Western Isles of Scotland. And the baker would buy his fish with bread and the fishermen would buy his bread with fish.

But there might be a year when there weren't a lot of fish, or there might be a year where the flour was sour. The fishermen would still get his bread and the baker would still get his fish, because they were in relationship with each other. And it seems to me that the more you think you need to accumulate the bigger fence you need to build around yourself and the less people you will trust and let into your life, which is the inverse of what it is to live true peace and security, which only comes in the context of relationship with people you can trust.

So actually the thing you should do instead of stockpiling stuff, if you're the guy, as I've heard Charles Eisenstein say this, "If you're the guy that's stockpiling gold in order to fend off the zombie apocalypse, that's a really stupid thing to do, because first of all, with no guarantee that gold will be worth anything in the event of a zombie apocalypse. And the second thing is, the last person I'd want to be in the event of a zombie apocalypse would be the guy that everybody knows has all the gold, because I'll be the first person they'd eat in order to steal my gold. What I'd rather do is if I have gold today is to share it now, share it now, give it away now. Love it now. Steward it now, give it to the people who will use it now and use it well and expand your circle of belonging through sharing what you've been given to steward."

Brian McLaren: Gareth, I wonder if you could mention just briefly a couple of movies that hit this theme. There are so many I know, but just give us a few.

Gareth Higgins: I'll just name two. And there are really two films that are about life, what really matters about a life. One of them takes place among people who are economically impoverished, and one of them takes place among people who are economically extremely wealthy. But what matters most is the meaning and relationships in their lives. The first *Queen of Katwe*, a film made by the magnificent director Mira Nair. It's set in Uganda. It's a true story about a girl who became a chess master, and it's a sports movie in which the question of whether or not she wins the big match is not anywhere near as important as what are the relationships like in her life and what does she believe about herself? That's *Queen of Katwe*. And the other film, *Being There* with Peter Sellers from 1979 about a very simple man who is welcomed into an environment of wealth and power that believes itself to be sophisticated and deep and actually turns out to be really shallow.

What's deep is the character that Peter Sellers plays, the simple one who at one point in the film, the most important thing he does is he picks up a little kind of new growth of a young tree and protects it from the elements, and nothing else that happens in the film by the people who think they were important looks anywhere near as meaningful and as special as caressing a little new growth on a tree that's being there. And as always, Brian, you've got biblical examples. I don't know what it says about me that I'm the one with the movie examples and you're the one with the Bible.

Brian McLaren: Well, I think when we're looking for that seventh story, the good news is we can find it in both places. So there are so many examples. I just want to give one. And it's a couple of statements from Jesus that are probably among Jesus' least popular statements. Almost never sermons are preached on this statement, and here it is. Jesus said, "You'll either love God and hate money or hate money and love God." Now,

Jesus has a way of enigmatic, dualistic statements as a way of forcing us deeper. And there is a whole industry of people who try to take those enigmatic statements and explain them so that they don't seem so enigmatic and more rational. But the more I live with that statement from Jesus, the more it makes perfect sense to me, because in a civilization that's so obsessed with domination, revolution, and accumulation, I mean those three stories explain an awful lot of what goes on in our world.

Here's the thing that happens. Things get value based on the money that is associated with them. And God, whatever God is, God is a source of value that is independent from money. And in fact, to have a source of value that's independent from money then becomes a challenge to the absolutism of money. This is one of the things that all of us who deal with money every day, which we all do have to be sensitive to money, can change our sense of what has value, and that can happen in a thousand different ways. But I offer people that enigmatic statement of Jesus, "You'll either love God and hate money, or you'll love money and hate God." As a way of deepening our interrogation of our own value system to see the ways in which that accumulation narrative may have its talents into our own souls.

Gareth Higgins: Let's close this episode about the accumulation story with a blessing that I offer as a way of reminding me and anyone who needs to about what really matters in life. It's called a blessing for discovering that the ordinary is always extraordinary. When the morning comes, may you wake up letting your grip on the night slip away and turn over to greet yourself. It's a new day and you are here. There is no less love on this day than there was on your best, no fewer opportunities to make more love.

The crystal exfoliation of water on the skin, the shiny green freshness of the apple in the fruit bowl, the zero gravity of feet on the ground, eyes closed, thankful, the transcendental space occupied by the first and the next and the last persons you see, the heart in the music you will hear. May you come to experience the deep knowing that the purpose of time is to show you you are alive. And so may you come no longer to be dominated by, but to dance with time. May you come to know your life's work, and so may you enjoy the mingling of mission with work and play. And may you hear the inner voice of meaning. Thus, may you come to own your story so that you can write the ending.

Brian McLaren: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Learning How To See. If you're interested in learning more, we encourage you to go to theseventhstory.com where you'll learn about a book that goes more deeply into the seven stories, a book for adults, and also a new illustrated children's book that we hope adults like you can use and give to children to help them learn about these important stories too. Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.