

**LEARNING  
HOW  
TO**



**SEE**

with

**Brian  
McLaren**

**Season 5, Episode 8**

**The Seventh Story**

feat. Gareth Higgins, co-host for Season 5

Gareth: So welcome, everybody. We're concluding our conversation about The Seventh Story today, and of course, for us, we'll never conclude this conversation, and I hope if The Seventh Story is true, that that conversation, it will never stop because it's more like a laboratory to experiment with the stories we live back and to ask ourselves, "What leads us more toward that love? What leads us more toward that courage to creativity and to community?" You can tell that a story's broken if it leads you to separation, scapegoating, and selfishness, and that's what we've been trying to present this angle on storytelling, that there are six primary stories that you could call stories of separation, scapegoating, and selfishness, stories of us versus them, stories in which the ego is the protagonist. We've called these the domination story, the revolution story, the purification story, the isolation story, the victimization story, and the accumulation story.

We've said often in this season that each of these stories is a response to a legitimate need and the world. The problem is it's just not a wise response to that legitimate need, but if you look at the needs that underpin each of the six stories and ask yourself, "What would a seventh story version of that story look like?" you might find that you move from domination into servant leadership. You might find that you move from revolution or a vengeance based overthrowing of oppressive power into a story that holds boundaries, but also promotes restorative justice. You might move from a purification story that externalizes blame onto other people and says, "They're the problem." You might move from that story into self-reflection about how the line between good and evil doesn't run between one group and another or between one person and another, but down the center of every person.

You might move from the isolation story that says, "The way to get peace and security is to withdraw from the world," and to recognize the kernel of truth in that is that, "Yes, we do need to withdraw, but where we need to withdraw to doesn't actually require us to move anywhere physically." We need to withdraw into our own depths through contemplation. Yeah, maybe you can have a nice retreat from time to time, but the practice of contemplation is a path of cultivating the capacity to be living in a retreat mindset, even if you're in the midst of busy traffic or conflict, the move from isolation to contemplation. You might look at the story of victimization, and instead of weaponizing your suffering or the suffering of others, to win some debate or some fight, which really just is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick, you might move toward binding the wounds of the brokenhearted and taking their suffering seriously, but finding ways along with that binding of wounds to unite your suffering with all the suffering in the world, not so that we can feel more burdened by it, but so that we can have more a sense of not being alone, and the tenderness of life that enables us to see beauty as more precious than we usually do. Finally, you might look at the accumulation story that says, "Peace and security comes through having more things."

You might transcend the absurdity of that statement, knowing that you can't hold on to anything, and if you do hold on to things, you often crush them, and instead, move toward a story of the stewardship of the beautiful in which the beautiful is revealed as even more beautiful when it is shared. These are what we see as the six stories of scapegoating, selfishness, and separation, and it is a joy to be in conversation about the move from that into courage, creativity, and community. Brian, I want to thank you at the beginning of this last episode for inviting me into this all those years ago, and that we keep having these conversations. I deeply appreciate the way you show up and model The Seventh Story to me,

and I'd love to hear from you what you think The Seventh Story actually is.

Brian:

I love how you shared that because I think it would be dangerous if there was this seventh story that was the plan to impose upon everybody to achieve world peace, because there is something about The Seventh Story that needs to be powerful without exercising power, and needs to be persuasive without backing people into a corner so they have to submit to it. There's something about it that has to involve freedom, and discovery, and choice, and it reminds me of a great South African theologian, David Bosch, who said that, "It's a characteristic of the messenger of God that the messenger of God can be excluded, ignored, imprisoned, and even executed, that the message that we really need has to come with a certain gentleness and powerlessness in order to exert its real power." This reminds me of a brilliant TED Talk anyone can access online by Chimamanda Adichie. The talk is titled The Danger of a Single Story, and we want to be sure in talking about The Seventh Story, not to propose it as a single story. The philosophical term for this is a totalizing metanarrative, if you want a lot of words or a lot of syllables and a couple of words there.

But here's what Chimamanda Adichie says. Here's a quote from her talk. "It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There was a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is nkali." That's N-K-A-L-I. "It is a noun that loosely translates to be greater than another. Like our economic and political worlds, stories too our defined by the principle of nkali."

"How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that, 'If you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, secondly.' Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story."

Isn't that a brilliant quote? I'm interested, Gareth, and what that elicits from you.

Gareth:

Well, where I come from, who's to blame depends on when you start the story. If you can move beyond that and look into the eye of the other person you're speaking to, or as someone had mentioned in the previous episode, Mira Nair said to me once that she would advocate, instead of or alongside the big blockbuster tent pole movies that occupy so much space at the box office, if everybody would voluntarily choose to watch some films that enabled them to see life through the eyes of the other, that that's one of the most important things we can do as storytellers and sharing with other people recommendations. I saw this, it showed me this. I heard this, it showed me this. Tell me what you saw. Tell me how you see ways, because ways of seeing are ways of storytelling, and as Byron Katie says, "All war belongs on paper," that people should write down the story and, in a sense, fight it out in the story.

Just fight through the story, not through actual weapons. Grapple with the story. Ask yourself, "What can I not see? What would I not see because of where I stand?" I remember a beautiful exercise that Walter Wink taught about imagining what it would be like if you

were the little boy that brought the five loaves and the two fishes, to what became the feeding of the 5,000, and you witnessed your packed lunch being turned into a feast for a multitude, but nobody thanked you from the front. You didn't get to go up on stage and receive a bouquet of flowers and some kind of medal.

In fact, you were sort of pushed to the side because there were 5,000 people there and you're tiny. Walter had this beautiful meditation about sitting on a rock and watching all the crowd disperse and the noise disappear, and then you feel a tap on your shoulder, and it's Jesus coming to you and saying, "I haven't forgotten you. Tell me what you saw today." We like to put ourselves in, if we imagine other stories, "I'd like to be Jesus in that story," or, "I'd like to be the disciples," or, "I'd like to be one of the people who got the free meal." Well, what about if you were the little boy who gave up at your lunch?

It can be a beautiful way for reading novels and watching films. Imagine yourself being the character who clearly is the most different from you than anybody else in the story, just to the degree that you're able to ask yourself, "What are the questions they're asking themselves? What would it be like if I had to be in this person's shoes?" I appreciate you saying the danger of a single story because I don't actually really know what *The Seventh Story* is. I like the idea of experimenting with liberation and reconciliation.

Liberation is not one and done, and reconciliation is never complete, and to me, that's not a sad thing. That's an invitation for what I can do with the rest of my life.

Brian: This idea that we're not proposing a seventh story as a totalizing metanarrative as a single story, when I've spoken about this in different settings, I say what we need isn't a storyline that wants to erase all the other storylines. What we need is a story space that invites people in whatever story they're part of, to stop and say, "I don't like where this story is going. I don't like how this is going to end, and is it possible there's a better story to tell? Could we make a change here and find a better ending?" That, to me, is what good news is about.

It makes sense of certain things. Jesus said, for example, how He would go around saying, "Repent." I don't think repent means feel guilty and shameful about things you've done necessarily. I think it means think this thing through. Think of this from a different angle. Rethink the story of your lives, and open yourself to a different and better ending.

Gareth: Yeah, I like the idea of calling it even a story lab, where it's like you have different ingredients, you get your bunsen burner, you've got different chemicals, and you're trying to figure out, "Okay, what proportion should that belong in there, and what do we need to let go of?" and so on and so forth. Then, some folks might say, and I might say, if other people were presenting this to me, "Well, where do you draw the line?" They make this slippery slope argument, and I heard a great answer to that question once, "Where do you draw the line?" The answer is somewhere. You draw the line somewhere, and the best place to draw it is when you've exhausted the possibilities of love.

You can draw the line there, and so when you've exhausted the possibilities of love, you can come back and say, "That's where the line is." I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I have a sneaking suspicion we will never exhaust the possibilities of love, and the way you can evaluate the story is, "Does it move us toward love, or does it move us toward separation?"

Brian: In Ignatian Spirituality, there is a practice called examine, and one way to conduct examine, it's a way of doing life reflection, is to look back over your day and look for moments of consolation and moments of desolation. That phrase is a way of saying moments when you moved toward love and moments when you moved away from love, moments when you moved toward justice and peace, moments when you moved away. If we were to think of The Seventh Story as the invitation that comes at every juncture of every other story to say, "You can defect from this storyline, you can break free from this storyline, and you can start moving toward light, and love, and peace, and depth, and so on." To me, that's a beautiful invitation. One of the ways these six stories, and then thinking of the possibility of a seventh has helped me is in the world of religion, because a lot of us feel that something is amiss in the world of religion.

I think what we could say is there is a part of religion that is always looking for and standing for The Seventh Story, but there's also part of religion that is always hitching its wagon to one of the other stories. For example, there's religion that baptizes and justifies domination. There's religion that legitimizes violent revenge, retaliation and that kind of violent revolution. There's religion that uses God to promise you success and accumulation, and the same with the other stories, but then, I think the part of religion or spirituality that all of us feel is the part that promises us some hope is this possibility of a different alternative, something that's good and new. We could call it good news.

Gareth: Yeah, a story worth living for, whatever the consequences might be. What they used to call midlife, but who knows anymore what the number of birthdays you've had means these days, but it used to be that they would call the age I am midlife, and you would be kind of reflecting on where you've come from and where you're going to and so on, and I don't find that particularly helpful anymore other than in the light of thinking, "If I knew I was going to die tomorrow, what would I do today?" Then, actually, a healthier way, I've heard some healthier ways of asking that question, which is, "If you knew you were going to die in six months from now, what would you do?" because if woke up today and found out you were going to die tomorrow, you'd probably be quite busy today, if not, panicked, because you'd have to decide, "Who am I going to have dinner with, and where am I going to be?" and all that. But if you could see your life in terms of you have six months to live something meaningful, well, what's the cost of risking an experiment with a seventh story way of living? That actually puts me in mind of the one film recommendation that I was going to give in this episode.

Maybe if you were to watch just one movie of all those that I have recommended thus far, and thank you for the opportunity to talk about cinema, there are many books and pieces of music, and television, and poems out there that are just as good. Maybe next time, you'll talk to people who know more about literature and music

than I do. Cinema is the place that I find myself artistically at home, and the film I want to recommend is a Japanese film called *Ikiru*, I-K-I-R-U. *Ikiru* means living or to live. It's from 1952, and it's about a man who receives a terminal diagnosis, and he has about six months left, and he experiments with some stories in the aftermath of his diagnosis, the story of hedonism, which is a form of accumulation, the story of hoping that other people could meet his needs, and it doesn't work for him. And it doesn't work for him. What does work is when he looks up from his life and decides to serve the needs of those more vulnerable than he is, and it does at least two things.

One is the ineffable joy of knowing you're making life better for somebody else, but it's not martyrdom. It's not martyrdom, it's joyful service to the common goods. The second thing is he discovers by living this way, something that I hope for all of us, that his fear of death disappears, and his fear of others disappears, because he's come to understand that he's not the protagonist of the world. Love is the protagonist of the world, and he is joining with that love. Yeah, there'll be stumbling blocks along the way and there may be some people out there who want to hurt you, but if you've allowed this love to mingle with you, then the other stuff just won't matter as much as it used to. I'm not saying it won't affect you, but it won't matter as much.

Brian: Gareth, as you draw this time to a close with a final movie recommendation, this might be a good time for me to pick one episode from the Bible that I think captures some essence of *The Seventh Story*, and it's a subject that's come up a few times for us over this season. The death of Jesus can be used as a piece of propaganda for the domination story, for the revolution story, for the accumulation story. In fact, if we look at the history of Christian theology, we can see the death and resurrection of Jesus become a kind of rhetorical tool, and we might even say weapon in many of these different stories. We don't have time to investigate all of that, but the way you just told the story of that Japanese film, it seems to me, provides a beautiful reflection on what Jesus' death of one deep dimension of meaning to Jesus' death. Here is a Man who decides at the age of about 30, that He will go public with a new story to tell, and He starts a movement.

He's looking around at His people and at His world, and sees the stories they're living by, and He thinks none of these stories are going to end well, and He begins to articulate. He finds all kinds of art forms to do it, the art form of the parable, which is a work of short fiction, we might say. He talks about it in a temple at times and in synagogues at times, and at other times on hillsides and alongside a river and along a road, and even in a house where the roof is being torn off. He finds times and places to try to help people imagine a new direction for their story. Then, at the end, when the powers, that be who love their domination stories and their accumulation stories and so on, when they decide, "We've got to get Him out of the way," He doesn't back down.

He doesn't give up on His story, but to the very end, He lives this story. In the stories of the resurrection, He doesn't come back saying, "Okay, enough for that love story. I'm going to come back a second time, and I'm going to get revenge on all those people." The story of the resurrection is, "Let's keep this story going," and He tells His followers to go into the whole world and keep this story going. And so here is a Person who lives and dies by a story of love and with a protagonist of the story being love. That might be a fresh way for people to take a very, very familiar story and see it maybe in its simplest and deepest light.

- Gareth: It's an extraordinary way to think about it, and I know that we want to say this, that none of us is going to fully embody or articulate The seventh Story even for 24 hours without interruption.
- Brian: Yes, yes, yes.
- Gareth: Nevermind the rest of our lives. There do appear to be some people who experience some kind of special grace that enables, let's call it the magic of The Seventh Story, to permeate them, and I'd say two things about those people. One is, first of all, unless you're actually living inside their brain, you don't know about the places where they don't necessarily experience the fullness of The Seventh Story, and the second thing is, well, if it was grace, it's not their fault.
- Brian: Yes. That's right. Exactly.
- Gareth: It's similar to something I've heard Father Richard say about there are folks who think they're contemplatives, but they're actually just introverts, and that may mean that actually, genuine contemplation may come easier to people who are introverted by demeanor, maybe more challenging for people like me who are extroverted by demeanor, but you know what? Recording a podcast may be a lot easier for an extrovert than an introvert. So nothing that we're saying here is intended to admonish anybody who is not perfectly living The Seven Story, but it is an invitation to reconsider the story that we are living, or maybe even more so, the stories that we hear most loudly told in our society, whether it's in fiction, or in the news, or in our religious circles, or our political circles. Just tweaking the story slightly might be enough to reorient everything that needs to change about it, and there are some stories that in a non-violent way, need to be completely let go of and replaced by something better.
- Brian: We want to thank all of you for being part of season five of Learning How to See. This tool that we've offered you of seeing the world in terms of seven stories is a tool, and any tool can be abused and turned into a weapon. Listen, we don't want to argue with you if you want to come and tell us, "No, there are actually eight stories, or nine, or 13." This is not our purpose. We're offering this as a tool to help you learn to see your world in a more compassionate and loving way, and so we entrust you this tool and also plead with you to use it with gentleness and with sensitivity.
- Use it as a tool, but not as a weapon in any way. We thought in concluding our last episode of this season, we would just have a slow meditation on these six stories, looking at how each of the six leads us to a seventh. And so what we'd like to do is we'll just say name a story one by one and offer several seconds of silence for you to just savor it, turn it over in your mind, and let this sink deeply enough, that it's not only something you understand, but can enrich the way you see.
- Gareth: From a story of domination to a story of servant leadership.
- Brian: From a story of revolution to a story of restorative justice.
- Gareth: From a story of purification to a story of self-reflection.
- Brian: From a story of isolation to a story of solitude that leads us to reentry into the world as salt

and light.

Gareth: From a story of victimization to a story of binding the wounds of the brokenhearted.

Brian: From a story of accumulation to a story of joyful generosity and sharing. We'd like to conclude this episode with just a few lines of that poem that we have shared with you at the beginning of each episode. "There's a new seventh story to live by, my friends, a story that doesn't turn us against them ..."

Gareth: "... of working for fairness and all that we do, of not striking back when others strike you ..."

Brian: "... of facing our problems, not running to hide, of not letting differences make us divide ..."

Gareth: "... of growing through pain to compassion for others, of not wanting more than our sisters and brothers."

Brian: "The new seventh story that I'm singing of ..."

Gareth: "... is the Story of peace, and the hero is love."