



EVERYTHING BELONGS

Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone
with Paula D'Arcy

Paul Swanson: Yogi Berra famously said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” The upside down wisdom of Yogi saddles up nicely with Falling Upwards. When what is in the way becomes the way, we surprise ourselves in the aftermath by a resilience and aptitude to meet the moment. Richard calls this Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone. What trips you up in life can be instructive for your personal evolution and transformation if you allow it. It might hurt like hell, it might alter your life’s trajectory, for there’s no good or bad turn in the stumbling, but there’s always stumbling.

In today’s conversation, we find ourselves on the front porch of Richard’s hermitage to talk about the themes of chapter five, Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone. In our time together, we talk about the stones that lead to growth, being scandalized, and the stumbles that lead us into the arms of mystery.

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

Paul Swanson: I’m Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: This is Everything Belongs.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard, for having us back over. We’re excited to talk about chapter five, Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone. I want to start, if you’re comfortable with it, of talking about we all have these stumbling stones that we’ve come across in our life.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: What has been a stumbling stone or a situation that’s come up for you where you got to the end of your own resources, the stumbling stone presented itself, but then after going through that, it opened up a new way of seeing? Is there one come to mind of a stumbling stone?

Richard Rohr: What would be one? I’m sure there are many. Well, as one, I’ve constantly recognized that I can’t get rid of my critiquing mind. I just can’t. It’s on permanent observation mode of seeing what’s keeping this tree, this animal, this person, this action from being perfect? It just jut, see it, there it is. Now, I still just keep stumbling over that. I don’t know how to overcome it. I don’t know how to change it. So I first had to recognize that there was a good part of it, that it first comes from the deep appreciation of the beautiful part of that tree or animal or person, but I so value it that I resent its alternative.

Even that’s okay a little bit, but then the arrogance of thinking, “It’s my job to change it according to my preferences,” which is all I can do, it’s still so subjective, making it to my liking. That very phrase gives it away. What says that tree has to be to your liking? Because there’s one dead branch on it, but that’s what I noticed, the dead branch. I think when you stop hating it and trying to remove it, that’s probably when you become a good photographer or a good artist. Let’s include that one dead branch in this otherwise perfect tree. That’s taken my whole life to say that and to mean it, to mean it.

Paul Swanson: You’re speaking to an artistry of the second half of life of this transition, which I think is really helpful, instead of it being a numbers game of columns of right or wrong.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: What I just heard you say was the acceptance, the forgiveness of what it is, but also seeing the opportunity and gift that it is. So you move with the nuanced artistry of full acceptance to be able to see things as they are, and that feels like-

Richard Rohr: You're describing it well. Keep going. That's right.

Paul Swanson: It just feels like a switch from the stumbling stone. You almost trip into the artist's path.

Richard Rohr: Uh-huh, and you get tired of being tired of yourself. You get sick and tired of being sick and tired as the alcoholics say of, "Why do I keep stumbling over that?" and subverting the moment, "Well, it isn't perfect." I think you do have to get sick and tired of being sick and tired.

I'm thinking of a little lakeside village in Switzerland that I once stayed in called Saint ... Who was it? St. somebody. St. Wolfgang, I think it was. It was so pretty. No town should be that pretty. The lake, the Snowpeak Mountain. I know I had to get away from it because I wanted to plant my, "Why can't I live here?" It's like wanting to live in Disneyland, which sounds stupid. I have to get away from here to learn how to love. This is too perfect. All the geraniums in the window boxes were in full bloom. I can't get my geraniums to bloom that way. What do they do in Switzerland? Little smiling ladies at the door. Do you ever live in Switzerland, Corey? No.

Corey Wayne: No, just Germany.

Richard Rohr: Germany. Well, take Germany and multiply it by three and you have Switzerland. Just perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect, and yet somehow antiseptic. Please don't take offense, Swiss people. I love your country, but there was a stern face on most people. Takes a lot of sternness to maintain such perfect streets. Even the trash cans are boxed in so you don't see trash cans. It's just ... Come on. Come on.

Mike Petrow: Gosh. Remember that time we lost our entire Swiss audience because of Richard's comment? Richard, you're making me think about Origen says that, "In order for the soul to discover its own beauty, it needs some adversity."

Richard Rohr: That's what I'm saying. Origen's got an answer for everything, doesn't he?

Paul Swanson: He got there first.

Richard Rohr: He did say that. Well, you were circling around to my ability to include the dead branch. Allows me to appreciate how exceptional the whole tree is. When you eliminate all dead branches in the St. Wolfgang, and I think they do, it's this isn't a world where you grow up. You have to maintain that perfection to be happy and you can't do it. You can't without telling some lies to yourself.

Mike Petrow: So that's the point, right? At some point, the attempt to be perfect fails us.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: We really can't do it.

Richard Rohr: So you have to pretend. We call it now denial of the shadow. Believe me, I love my trips to Switzerland. They were such sweet people, but they were sweet when I would talk this way too because they loved to be released from their whatever it is.

Paul Swanson: I think about Swiss clocks, the Swiss army knife, everything that they're known for is emblematic of the first half of life, of extreme order.

Richard Rohr: Extreme order. That's right.

Mike Petrow: This is the point of this chapter is that our extreme order at some point breaks down. It crashes.

Richard Rohr: Or leads you to total denial, refuse to see that it's broken down.

Paul Swanson: You remember we were talking to Jim on an earlier episode of this podcast when he talked about our expectations, when they build upon each other, build upon each other, they eventually let you down. So even our expectations can be a gateway into ... They can be the stumbling stone that helps you trip into the second half of life. How do you feel like the first half of life prepares you to rise up from the stumbling stone, the gifts, the things you learn in the first half of life? Do they aid you in rising up from the stumbling stone?

Richard Rohr: They give you enough structure so you can include the anti-structure. You have to have a container. I think so many people after they read me or listen to me fall in love with this word container. I heard the young men using it this weekend at the Rites. It isn't a word that most people use that much, but the idea of nothing can be sustained without containment. Now, when you spend too much time making a perfect container and there's no permeable membranes by which there's intersection with the not me, the non-self, you become selfish.

So you need container or you don't have identity, but if you overdo your container, you have too much identity and you exist in opposition to other people's identity. That's why I had to add in my old talks on the cosmic egg my story, our story, other people's story. I only added that in recent years. If you do our story like our example of the Swiss, forgive us, Swiss, I love you, but you do our story too much and you don't know how to love the Italians.

They told me in Austria who are almost like the Swiss too, "Now you get on a train and you'll be in Austria as long as it's clean, and all of a sudden there'll be lots of noise and lots of dirt and you know you're in Italy." Suddenly, they all laughed and it's absolutely true. We got on the train. We heard people yelling, and dirty in front of the station and we knew we were in Italy, but that they would describe that they know who they are and they know in a humorous way it's too much, but it's the only way we know how to be is to keep our yards clean. When they come here to New Mexico and we have rusty cars in our yard, the Swiss just, "Why do they do that?" They just can't believe New Mexico. Even though they love it, they hate it. It's too disordered.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting.

Richard Rohr: I would too if I was raised in Switzerland.

Mike Petrow: So we just lost our Italian audience as well. I love this, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Oh, we lost our Italian. Forgive me, Italy. I love you.

Mike Petrow: So I'm thinking about the building of this container, and while we're talking about it, the way I'm seeing it in my mind is I'm thinking of it as a vehicle. We build a vehicle that we can get around through life.

Richard Rohr: That's good. Go ahead. Go ahead. That's much better than the way I say it.

Mike Petrow: No, no, no, it's brilliant, but I'm thinking about this stumbling stone. You know I'm going to quote Origen. Origen, when he talks about how we read scripture, he says that there are intentionally stumbling blocks, roadblocks, impossibilities, and things that challenge us that we crash into. The actual word for the stumbling block in his writing is *scandala*, the things that scandalize us.

Richard Rohr: Well, that's what it means, *scandalum*.

Mike Petrow: It blows up our vehicle. It crashes our vehicle. It wrecks our GPS, the thing that we think that's telling us where to go. For him, he said that it's to move us beyond our literal understandings, to get us to move beyond absurd fables and silly tales. It's to get us to think differently. When I read your writing, I realized, "Oh, my God, and life does that too." We crash into something sooner or later. This is that chapter. You say, "If we're on a classical spiritual schedule, at some point we're going to crash into something that's going to show us the failings and the limitations of our GPS, of our stories, of the vehicle that we've built to get there."

Richard Rohr: These cardinals who are fighting the Pope actually use the word the pope is scandalizing the Catholic faithful by talking this way.

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Richard Rohr: He's creating a stumbling block, to use the origin of the word. You have to be scandalized a bit like a person who is raised like a normal heterosexual, when they first hear ... I remember my own parents. My dad, he's 80, he's older. He lived till 89. It came on the news and he said, "What's a homosexual?" I remember trying to describe to him, and they both leaned forward out of their chair. We're in Kansas, remember. My mother says, they listened, "Why would anybody do that?" but they were raised that isolated, and a lot of people are. They're not bad people, but they were scandalized that there were ... Unfortunately, they didn't take it to the outrage level, just the original stumbling stone, "Well, why would anybody do that?". That has to happen is my point.

Mike Petrow: So that's the thing.

Richard Rohr: You must be scandalized.

Mike Petrow: The scandal is not a failure. It's actually good for us.

Richard Rohr: That's the point.

Paul Swanson: It's an expansion of our horizon of experience or understanding, but it brings us into a larger view.

Richard Rohr: I had to meet Catholics who didn't go to mass every Sunday and be scared, "My God, that was unthinkable." "Now, you do know that's not the issue, don't you?"

Paul Swanson: So Pope Francis being scandalized in the Catholic church should be worn as a badge of honor.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Well, he's saying that, that, "Some people criticize me," he said, "is good criticism." He's amazing.

Paul Swanson: He is amazing. I just so appreciate hearing the ways that we can take this word like scandalized and bring into our own lives and think about ways that we've been scandalized and how it can lead towards further opportunities of depth and compassion, and even for the Swiss.

Mike Petrow: Even for the Swiss.

Richard Rohr: Absolutely. You must stumble. That's the line from the Psalms, "Stumble over the stumbling stone." For our good Jewish brothers and sisters to say the unknowable, unspeakable God was contained in a person, that was scandalous, and you've got to appreciate why that was scandalous for them to see how they were half right, but we would say they were being led to a bigger frame and it was very hard for them. You got to be scandalized to reshape good and evil, probably a number of times.

Mike Petrow: Well, and the same thing's probably true of our religious beliefs. They have to scandalize us so that we're always outgrowing them?

Richard Rohr: That's right. That's all I'm saying. You guys understand well. I'm glad we hired you.

Paul Swanson: This is a great point I think for us to put a period and just also thank you for-

Richard Rohr: Oh, you're welcome.

Paul Swanson: ... scandalizing so many people, Richard, by opening them up to new ways of being and thinking about their lives and the divine. Thank you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. You make me center in on core ideas and clarify them just a little bit more. There'll always be a mystery though. All great spiritual teaching has the character of paradox to it. Someone said that. Do you know who that was? It wasn't Origen, was it? No.

Mike Petrow: I think Origen just did it.

Paul Swanson: I love that John O'Donohue quote where he says, "It's strange to be here. The mystery never leaves you alone."

Richard Rohr: The mystery never leaves you alone.

Mike Petrow: Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Today, we're joined by Paula D'Arcy. Paula is a writer, retreat leader, speaker, and adjunct faculty member at Oblate School of Theology and Seton Cove Spirituality Center. She's also president of the Redbird Foundation, which supports the growth and spiritual development of those in need, as well as those invested in the opening of the heart and the healing of this world.

Paula, thank you so much for joining us today on the Everything Belongs podcast. This season, we're talking about Father Richard's book, *Falling Upward*, and how we can live those teachings forward in our own life. As a place to begin, for those out there who maybe are not yet familiar with your work and some of the things that identify you as an author, a therapist, a retreat leader, and a teacher lighting candles of hope and healing wherever and whenever you can, how did you first hear or sense the call of this work in your life?

Paula D'Arcy: Well, the call of this work definitely came out of the accident that I went through and the loss of my family members. It came slowly because I think in speaking of, it didn't come out of the light, it came out of the dark, really, but in the dark of that period of time, I had this overwhelming sense that everything I had ever believed in was too small, not necessarily that it was wrong, but that it had needed to grow. So the things that came up for me, like my idea of a loving God and yet this had happened, that had to completely shift actually for me.

There was also a sense that I'm not sure I can ever really explain, but that this dark I was in was not a darkness without hope. It was luminous. It was like a luminous dark, and I felt like something was holding me in that dark, and it wasn't the mind at all. It was something that I couldn't quantify, but I knew that in some way that there was a place that was further in some realm than I was and it wanted to help if I would turn that way.

To me, I guess I would call it a force of love, but I also felt that my aliveness was so heightened. It was as if all the things I used to worry about and think about, they just no longer existed. I had a pinpoint focus and it changed my perspective, I guess I would say, because I understood, really understood for the first time in my life I didn't have control. I understood I didn't have control, that life was happening on its own and that the world, suddenly my eyes were open to the whole world was suffering like I was hardly the first person to lose a husband or to lose a child, but it wasn't anything in my comfortable life that I had given a lot of attention to other than maybe in the mind understanding that, but now it was, I don't know, a lived experience that there was so much I needed to change about my perspective.

The way I prayed changed during that time because prior to that, it had been petitions for things or intercessions for other people. My prayer became so simple. It was two words, "Show me. Show me," or, "Teach me how to see." I think that was the guidance from within that was really transforming that prayer into something else. Out of all of that became a real wish once a lot of the darkness had lifted for me to help others know that in these times for which there are no easy answers and when you're suffering so much, but there is something that is almost helping you, is calling you forward to something else because now you have

given that your complete attention.

It was both comforting and it was very new, but since all my terms for life seemed to have left, all I had left was to meet life, to meet life on its own terms. So it was less like a linear search. It was an opening. I was opening, opening, opening to whatever it was in front of me. I couldn't even tell you how long this went on for. I know, as I look back, I was really in shock and numb with grief for a very, very long period of time. So I had moved interior, and that's where I began to understand the perspective of what it really is to suffer and to be powerless. There was this overwhelming sense of being powerless, and yet that there was something that was trying to teach me about that. I think that's what I would say. That was the source of when I got on my feet of wanting to go out and to do things to help others.

Mike Petrow: I'm so moved by your answer, and I have to tell you, in getting ready for this episode, I've been listening to other podcasts that you've appeared on. I'm new to your teaching, so it's been such a gift, but I can tell you truthfully that you've already made me cry this morning because I was listening to another one of your talks on the way here. I so appreciate the way that you have put your personal healing in the service of the healing of the world.

I have just a random followup question I want to ask based on everything you just said. One of the things that Father Richard teaches is that two of the most powerfully transformative experiences that we have are great love and great suffering. Yet as I'm listening to everything you've just said, it's making me feel so aware that those are not separable realities. To love deeply is to suffer and we suffer because we love. Does that make any sense? What wisdom would you offer our listeners for keeping hearts open to that as they meet the reality of the life that they are living?

Paula D'Arcy: I absolutely agree that it's one thing. It was like being in a crucible, but in that crucible, we're both suffering and love, and the love was moving through the pain inexplicable, but it was. So I came to see that if you turn from the pain, then you're also turning from the love and the potential that is there. They were both there. It isn't any concept I had or probably you ever had about a loving God and this is how your life will unfold, but there it was. It was those two things together. They were not separate or not separate.

As I came to see that that love is moving in the secret rhythm through everything, then it makes you ask the question then, "Then what would I turn from? What would I look away from?" because it's coming in ways I absolutely never would've anticipated or expected. Yet I think I have spent all the remaining decades of my life following that time still understanding the brightness that was in that dark, still understanding the experience, still sometimes sitting at a traffic light and saying, "This really happened to me. This really happened to me."

I had a whole other life journey. It was taken away and yet something else was being given. I think something else is always being given to us. Yet I wasn't raised, most of us aren't raised saying, "Oh, even when the dark comes, don't turn everything." Everything is the wooing of this love, but it's what it showed me. That was my prayer, "Show me. Teach me how to see," and there it was.

Paul Swanson: I'm so struck by that, becoming your prayer, the show me, and I couldn't help but think

about Jesus saying, “Come and see.” Then in that, “Show me,” and the dialogue with, “Come and see,” that slow work that you just mentioned of you weren’t sure how long it took to break through that numbing and to see with new eyes, and then that your work since then has been to say to others, “Come and see,” those who are saying, “Show me,” that you are offering the conditions for folks to see anew, whatever the hardship, the realities of their life have brought them. How do you see that dialogue of the prayer of, “Show me,” and, “Come and see,” as a centralizing factor for how you support others through the retreat work that you do, the teaching that you do and the writing that you do?

Paula D’Arcy: It’s a great question. Because for any of us, what we’ve experienced is nothing we can give to someone else. All you can do is live your own experience. So I think there was never a moment saying, “I will be on airplanes for the rest of my life for all these decades,” or, “I’ll be going here, going there.” I was so convinced that life is happening on its own and that things would be put in front of me, often things that I felt disinclined to be part of, but the urging would be so strong. It was really the follow me of the gospel.

I just read a poem that somebody ended by saying, “He told his disciples, ‘Follow me,’” and the next line was something on the effect of, “He meant that not for the disciples, but for us. That is meant for us.” So I was living out my, I guess, growing surrender to that love. Then in the taking of whatever was put in front of me, things would happen. The telling of the story was never a telling of the story. It was always a conversation with people. It was always seeing in people’s eyes, “Oh, my God, I have wept in that way. I’ve been alone at night in that way.” The compassion that that evoked in all of us often changed the room. It just changed the room that we were in.

I was learning that it’s not really about our circumstances. It’s what’s moving through them and can we open to that even though our human heart is broken, and that the circumstance simply needs to be met by something that is greater. So if I met my circumstance only by, which we all did in the beginning, calling it a tragedy, it was an announcement, but it wasn’t helpful or if I met my anger about it or if I met my profound sadness about it only with more of the same, then transformation wasn’t possible.

So I just grew to understand. I was shown that you had to meet the circumstance with something that was greater than the circumstance. You just had to. What’s greater, the greater love is greater. Compassion is greater. It’s an unbelievable quality of healing, awareness. A growing awareness is greater. It is something that you find what you’re looking for right within what you’re dealing with, but you have to exceed that circumstance. You have to be willing to say, “Okay. So just as my mind would try to help me understand this, it’s not helpful.”

The way Einstein said, “No problem solved using the same consciousness that created it.” So it was the giving of that perspective within that really helped me, helped me to stand in a room where there was so many people hurting and not go down with it because I knew that there was something moving in that, and that if people could at any point in their life, a moment, a line in a book, some scene in a movie, if at any moment they could be brought to that, then something else would evolve. I don’t know if that answers it, but that’s-

Paul Swanson: It certainly does. I think that level of seen is part of why I think myself and so many others

have been moved by your teaching. I'm thinking back now to the times that you've shared the stage with Father Richard, particularly in the early 2000s when you both were teaching together on the spirituality of the two halves of life. I'm wondering, thinking about that framework, what was it about that framework of the spirituality of the two halves of life that originally drew you in, and maybe how does that connect to your own story as well?

Paula D'Arcy: You're using exactly the word I think I would use because he had created for that when we got together to talk about it, a framework that caused me to think about it in ways I just never had before, that there were certain experiences that were really helpful to have in the first half of life, but if you lived that through your whole life, it wouldn't give to you what wants to be given. It wouldn't allow you maybe to see that other perspectives. So it was certainly that. It was the way that he was posing it, that the stumbling stone was really the seed for growth.

So to look at it in that way, this has taken me down, but the point appears to be not just to stay the same your whole life but to grow, to really grow and open and grow in seeing grow in awareness. So that was such a beautiful, I guess, frame, and it caused me to do a lot of thinking about the first half of life. I can remember sitting at my desk and thinking in the first half of life I think in terms of love, anyway, my overriding questions were always, "Do you love me? Does anybody love me? Can I make them love me? Can I please people enough so that they will then love me?" and then realizing that in the second half of life, that question becomes, "Do I yet know how to love? Am I loving in the way that I might?"

So we could see that progression, I guess. I remember in that weekend or those days, I used the image for the first half of life of a table and how I was brought up sitting at a table that was very solid in terms of my parents being there. My father was very strict. We didn't love that at the time, but it provided a lot of safety and a lot of questions were asked across that table. It was during that early part of your life you'd think that those answers are forever and they weren't, but it helped so much to have something concrete that seemed black and white at that time because it gave a sense of security.

Then I moved with that table and realized that after the accident, I was just three months pregnant and moving back to my parents' home for a few months, I was sitting at that same table, and yet now, I was just broken by grief. I can remember my head on that table and just crying when no one was around. I thought to myself, "Wow, does this table go anywhere?" When I moved back in the six month of my pregnancy to Connecticut, which is where I'd lived, where the accident happened, and I got a little apartment and I put up a table that my husband Roy had actually made.

It occurred to me as I was preparing for this conference that at that table, he had imagined that family would be able to sit. It was a long harvest table. He had imagined that this is what this would be like a community of people around a table. Now, I'm sitting there at that table by myself, and that's when I began to write, not a book, but I was just trying to move the pain from inside of me to outside so that I could breathe better. So I sat at that table and I wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote.

Ultimately, as my life has gone on and the table is in my home today, that table became a place where I imagined new things, formed a nonprofit where we did some international

conferences, and at that same table, we did name badges and we filled bags for over a thousand people just my daughter and I, the two of us. I realized then that at the time when the table was built, we were now helping people to get airline passage to come to the conference from countries I couldn't have located on a map at the time when the table was built. So I could see that the form of something may remain like a table, but the meaning behind it, it evolves as we're hopefully all evolving.

So all of that came up because of working on that conference and because of the way that I was fighting to see how is it that we could evolve if we chose to. I don't know. Then I think from Richard, especially I learned as we were doing the conference the advantage of both of the tables, the early table with the answers and learning our catechism and putting our report card in front of my father and hearing what he had to say, but a great advantage. Then the table in my adult years, if it remained that, nothing would change, nothing would change because now, I had entered a place that was entirely mystery and something that I did not know, and I was beginning to learn how much I did not know. So that conference was really huge in helping me to gain that perspective and that framework, actually.

Mike Petrow: Wow, this is wow. This is rapidly turning into one of my favorite hours of being alive. I'm enjoying this conversation so much and taking so many notes. So I'm thinking about this quote from Joseph Campbell. He says, "We have to let go of the life that we thought we were going to have to have the life that's waiting for us," but it's so easily romanticized. It's thrown on a poster, thrown on a meme. This is so much deeper, and I'm realizing there's so much grief in the letting go.

I apologize for taking a jump here, Paula, but I feel like I have heard you discuss your book, *Winter of the Heart*. If I'm getting the story correctly, I think at one point I heard you tell a story that you were asked to write the book perhaps by a publisher, and you said, "I don't want to write anymore about grief. I've written a bunch about grief," and realized then that it actually been several decades since you'd sat down and written about grief. So I'm thinking as we're talking about these movements and then the two tables and the two halves of life, what was it like for you then years later to sit down and write about grief again, and how has your perspective evolved now in this season of life, and what wisdom can you offer us from that? Does that question make sense?

Paula D'Arcy: It does. First, I hated the publisher who was asking me to do it, and then once I got over myself, I thought to myself, "This is really a beautiful opportunity as an older woman to look back like that young woman who went through that and to call from that what she learned and what she knew and to see what I would say to somebody today." I really, actually, and I apologized to the publisher and said, "No, I'm really grateful to have an opportunity to do this." I found that there's always, struggle may not be the right word, but there is always the issue of where you are right now and where you're seeing and knowing that other people aren't there and bringing yourself back to where they may be and how difficult it was to put aside so many things I had believed in and to look over and over again for something that was larger and to go down deep enough into the story you were living, to come up inside, really, of everything.

So it was all of those things. It was all of those things, but it was also a wonderful opportunity to land in the place of what I was learning, what I had learned over those years,

and to be able to teach that without apology, just as calling somebody forward and saying, “You may not be in this place right now, but let it fall like a seed.” I’ve said that to audiences over and over again because you do not know. You do not know who is ever listening to you, sitting before you, and they think, “I’m nowhere near that place,” and to be able to say, “And neither was I. All I asked was, ‘Show me what is this place like. Teach me to see.’” So it’s an invitation that comes out of the dark, the luminous dark that is so profound. Really it is. You can never be able to tell anybody else what that path would be. You’re shown. You are just shown. So it was a great, great experience.

If I may add this one, I was in an accident 17 years after the original accident or 27 years, I take it back. That year, I had been telling people all year, “It has now been 27 years. I was 27 when it happened. It’s been 27 years past that accident.” Again, I guess I’ve been saying this a lot all these years, “I don’t want to go back to that scene again. I don’t want to talk about that. I just want to go on into something else.” On the same day that the accident had happened, at the same time of day, I was leaving somebody’s celebration in Houston and a car ran a red light and I got struck again. Same. Same.

I couldn’t even help myself sitting in the car. I was not badly injured, but it was just that it would’ve happened on the anniversary of that date at the same time of day. So there were sisters nearby, Cenacle sisters, and they took me in for a couple of days and they got me checked out at the doctors and had X-rays taken, helped me to get a new car eventually to drive home, but interestingly, I was then coming to meet with Richard about some conference that we were going to do. I wondered, “Would I go? Would I not?” I was so shaken and I was right back where I was in my earliest grief like crying in the shower so it wouldn’t upset anybody else, and just feeling that life was so fragile.

So I decided to come and I asked Richard, “What do you think?” and he said, “My God.” He said, “I don’t know, I don’t know.” When I came back to where I was living at the time, I had a prayer group, and the people in that prayer group when they heard about the accident, even before coming to Albuquerque, they had surrounded me and nobody could see what this might be, but one woman in the prayer group was not there. So when I came back from Albuquerque, she came immediately to see me and she said, “I hear you’ve been asking the question, ‘Why would this happen?’” and she said, “I think I know why.” What she said to me will stay with me for the rest of my life. She said, “You have been speaking to anybody that will listen all this year, ‘It’s now 27 years past. I’m pushing that away,’” and she said, “I don’t think you can.” She said to me, which was so true, she said, “Arguably, the greatest light that you have ever experienced happened in that accident. So if you push that away, then you’re also pushing the light.”

It went right through me, and from that moment I was okay. I was back feeling not so fragile. It was a great teaching that if you push something completely away, “I don’t want to go there,” then you’re pushing away also the light that came to you and it can’t do that. If it took an automobile accident that day, that time to make me know that I’m nothing but grateful, I’m nothing but grateful, it’s why we stand, I think, before everything thing. We’re encouraged to meet life because we do not know ever what’s moving in life and what’s trying to be given.

I think if we or more of us in the world living, looking at what is actually being given, and

if we were following that, this would be a different world. The world is really a mirror of where our hearts are. That was such an important lesson and that made way for then when somebody asked me to write about grief again, it made way for that to happen and to be able to write about the light that I now realized was moving, but always in ordinary ways, things that I saw in hindsight, people and what they did or a book and what it said to me. It was all in different ways, but this is what we have, our ordinary human life and it came in that way.

Mike Petrow: That's so powerful. Thank you. You have me crying for the second time today.

Paula D'Arcy: This is why we're here, Mike.

Mike Petrow: That's so good.

I so appreciate that. I think from the outside of grief and our being the audience and the authors and the interpreters of our own stories, I think sometimes there's this notion that eventually we get over our grief. What I hear you describing is that we don't get over it, but our relationship to it deepens and changes. I really want to say thank you for that because I think in your sharing that, you're probably liberating a lot of our folks who are listening who have a story that they haven't gotten over or have a grief that they're carrying and they're wondering, "Why is this still such a huge part of my reality?" It sounds like it never stops being that, but I love that notion of shining a bright light. Goodness gracious.

Paula D'Arcy: The lens after a period of time is not the pain. The lens is the love that was given. That's what will always move me to tears when I try to speak about it. So yes, the wound is there, but not in a way that is painful. It's now in a way that reminds me constantly of how much has been given to me, to all of us if we see it. "Show me."

Mike Petrow: So good. There's a passage where Isaac of Nineveh talks about when we sit in contemplative prayer and he says memories come to us, and he talks about, first, the memory disturbs us. Eventually, we come to a point where we can sit with it and just be in the space with it, and then we come to a point where when the memory comes to us we realize it's coming for our education and transformation. I just thank you, Paula. You've just taken something that I read about and you just demonstrated it incarnationally in a 3D reality for me. So I really appreciate that.

Paul Swanson: The image that came to mind to me was this thought of a wound that then heals and turns into a scar, and then there's a story to tell about where that scar came from. It's in that process of those tales of the scar that we often are most marked by these pinnacle stories that really direct and shape our lives in ways that we couldn't be who we are today if we didn't have those wounds and scars to sometimes stop us in our tracks and sometimes open us into more expansive ways. This makes me think about sacred wounds.

One of the commonalities between you and Richard is that you have both cultivated, animated Rites of Passage and invited folks to experience Rites of Passage. I know Richard will sometimes say, "If you don't do Rites of Passage, life will initiate you anyway," but it's great to have these systems set up so that we can enter into them with elders looking over us, with siblings alongside of us to engage in ways of acknowledging the different passages that we move through, whether it's a first, second half of life or a different framework. I'm curious for you, Paula, what roles do you think that Rites of Passage have for marking and

embodying a shift in the way we participate in life?

Paula D'Arcy: For a lot of reasons, I think it's a wonderful opportunity. One is that most of the Rites of Passage in the past decades that I've done for women have been a great expanse in just that circle of 12 or 15 that is making the Rites. There will be women, lots of them who are young, 20s, 30s, 40s, and then there'll be somebody there that's in their 70s and somebody in their 80s. So you don't always get that in life where you're sitting. It's not just the elders saying, "Oh, you've got a lot to learn," but everybody learning from everybody, everybody being a teacher.

Initially, you hear a little bit about the story that people are carrying, but then it becomes something that takes us past the story, and then we're asking ourselves. There was a question that I asked that will always, always stay with me. When the accident had happened and I was back at my parents' home, I was in the closet and I was taking a box and putting together some of my husband's clothing that might be given to Salvation Army, St. Vincent De Paul, wherever. I had his bathrobe in my hands and I heard something inside of me saying, "What are you doing?" It was clear. It wasn't asking, "How are you disseminating these items?" but it was, "You were given a life. What are you doing?"

That's the heart of our women's Rites of Passage because we all have habits. We have patterns that are so conditional to us, we do not see them unless we're in a situation like that and everybody is doing that work. Suddenly, you begin to see it because if you don't see it, we'll always, all of us will react unconsciously and history will be our lens, not what's right in front of us. So the only question that ever gets asked in the Rites of Passage circle is, "What are you present to? Right now, this moment, what are you present to?"

So I think that a community of people looking at this very same conditioning in themselves and then hearing how someone else met something, you see yourself in it, and people usually leave really changed. We talk about a lot of things, and that moves as the years go on. It's really evolved as we evolve, but there is something that is so life-changing just in looking at why we do what we're doing, like stopping and saying, "Why am I doing that and what needs to change and how else might I be looking at that?" or, "What is the light inside of what I'm doing in this threshold, and if I was looking to that more than I was just repeating the story that has me feeling very upset, if I were to look at the movement of that light, then I don't know, then what do I see? What do I see?"

It was that light at the age of 27 that began to pose those questions to me. The creation of the Rites was just a wonderful way with women, both young and old and middle age, to come together. It's just a beautiful thing. At the one that we did last September, I made an offhand comment. We were getting up and leaving for lunch and I said, "I was thinking of the book *The Red Tent*, which talked about in the medieval times when women, when they were having their periods, they would go into this tent and they would be alone to have conversations and to learn from one another." I said, "Sometimes I wish today we had that."

One of the enterprising women in that Rites of Passage went out at our free time in the afternoon, collected bread spreads and blankets from people, found walking sticks that were at the facility where we were. When we came in, it looked like Saudi Arabia. She had created this tent that we all could fit into. It was amazing that there were many times during that

Rites of Passage when someone would say, “I have something I want to tell, but I want us to be in that tent,” and we heard it differently. We heard it with an ancestry. We heard it with thousands and thousands of women who had walked this walk, and then we heard it for and how is that different for us today, how can we meet that in a newer way. So I love the Rites of Passage.

Paul Swanson: Thank you for sharing that. I so appreciate hearing how the spaces that we enter and how we enter them and who we enter them with in the questions we ask that those all shape us, that creating a tent for that particular community connected the deep lineage and also allowed it to be the discovery of what could happen in the present moment with that collection, with that circle. To me, that is the beating heart of Rites of Passage is that continual discovery, even as it is an ancient renewal of something that’s happened many times, but it’s always refreshed in the present moment when you show up with that sense of openness and presence. So thank you so much for sharing that story.

Paula D’Arcy: When we left in September realizing that it would not work following September to recreate a tent with new people. That came out of that conversation. We were relating and having a conversation with life then that was germane to that group, “What are you present to?” and that’s what they were present to. Anything else would then become just a repetition, like the very patterns and habits that we were trying all to see so that we could be able to go to a larger place. So it was great.

Mike Petrow: I’m looking over my notes of what I’m writing down from this conversation, and I love this notion. This is my words, not yours, but you said something earlier that sounded like when we are in the midst of a loss that’s so huge, eventually finding our way into something bigger. Does that make sense? The notion that our ancestors and rituals can be that bigger container or the spiritual stories that are handed down to us. So this chapter is *Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone*, and in the chapter Richard says that sooner or later if we’re on some classic spiritual schedule, we have to fail at something or something has to fail us.

In our conversation that we had earlier with Richard, we talked about Origen of Alexandria, talks about the scandal of the spiritual life, the roadblocks that we crash into as the actual translation of things that scandalize us. I’m thinking of this quote I love from Carl Jung that says, “God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my path violently and recklessly, all things which alter my plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or for worse.”

Now in this chapter, the most frequently that I’ve heard in my time being around Richard’s teaching around this book, the line that I hear most frequently quoted from this chapter is from you, Paula, and it’s this line where you say all of this so much more gracefully and succinctly and you simply say, “God comes to you disguised as your life.” That is so profound. Can I ask you? What does it mean to you that God comes to us disguised as our lives?

Paula D’Arcy: Anything I’ve already said, all those teachings and learnings came through my life experience. It wasn’t something ethereal. It wasn’t me sitting down and some light appeared and I learned all of these things, but it was person by person, day by day, but just with that prayer, “Show me,” help me to see and beginning to see even in the early parts of the grief

that I was looking at a small piece of a very large picture and that there was more. So it came in the closet that's just in this embodied life and I'm packing clothes and something says to me, "What are you doing because you were given a life? What are you doing with that?"

So to me, the stumbling stones are the honest questions and perspectives that arose out of a life experience and a matter of seeing beyond what the goals of your life you wanted to have or what those experiences you hoped would last forever, even though we know intellectually nothing lasts forever that's human bound. That's what that experience meant to me, that I didn't have to go to a monastery, I didn't have to be in a cell someplace, I didn't have to live in the desert for the rest of my life. I just had to show up for my life.

The poet David White always says, "There are conversations in life that we never even have," like with nature or with running water or with any of these things. I hadn't experienced this summer being on the East Coast, and it was when there was flooding in Vermont and it came right down in between Vermont and New Hampshire. I was in a little town in Connecticut called Old Lyme, which I then learned is the source of the Connecticut river, which was flooding. I was standing on the beach with a young woman one day. We were the only two people there, and it was early in the season, and all of a sudden we saw a line come across the ocean and then it moved closer and closer and closer to us, and then the whole sea went brown. It was all the debris from what was happening states away.

All of a sudden coming onto the shoreline, there were trees, eight-foot trees, there were parts of docks, parts of boats, parts of homes, and we're standing there looking at that. That was just life itself teaching right there, right there on that shoreline. It took four days for the ocean to renew itself. We would go out every day and we would just stand there and say, "Will we ever see it blue again with sunlight sparkling on it?"

I think for some people it's probably different. They do go to a cave and it comes to them. There's no one way, but for me, this seems to have been the way, that through the very life experience, love is speaking if you look in that direction. Also, I want to say that we wouldn't even remember that I ever said that, but Richard has quoted me saying that so many times. That's why the phrase is well-known. I said to him once, "You can have it now if you want it because you've probably talked about it more than I."

Paul Swanson: That's fantastic. That's fantastic. I loved how that line and that story you just told also just keep connecting back to that prayer of, "Show me," and how life keeps showing you the presence, the divinity speaking through you. The visualization of the ocean continuing to show up and trying to renew itself, and you showing up with eyes to see, "What is the lesson in this? What can I learn through what is being exhibited before me?" Those eyes to see and invite to reality to teach I think is just so deeply needed and so much a part of this chapter of the stumbling stone.

I'm just grateful for the ways in which that you're sharing stories and prayers that are so concretized in your own life that when a line like that can be written and then repeated a thousand times, it doesn't lose its nourishing effect. I love how it just continues to, like the ocean, renewing itself, keeps renewing itself in the present moment.

Mike Petrow: Follow up to what you just said, Paul, though, again, I want to say thank you for that

because it's like a Zen Koan, that God comes to us disguised as our life is. It's one of those statements that you can sit with and sit with and sit with, and it never quite lands the same way twice. In the love and the suffering and the joy and the grief and the gratitude and the terror and the symmetry that comes out of all of that, I just want to ask this one little stinger question for Paula, which is one of the things I wonder about in my own journey is I have had some profound losses. In those moments, friends of all different spiritual persuasions have often very well meaningly looked at me and said, "Someday you'll be grateful for this." It's always been true and it's never been welcomed to hear at the time of the loss. Paula, is there any advice you would give us, those of us who like to give advice on how to be responsible with this knowledge and understanding and not to offer it when it's not helpful? Does that question make sense?

Paula D'Arcy: It makes tremendous sense, and it's probably one of the most asked questions, "How can I now go back home and convince my husband of this or something of that ilk?" Thomas Merton called it a violence that we do when we step ahead of where someone is and try to bring a wisdom that's been given to us for ourselves. I would even go further and say, and anyway, even if the person was in a very exalted state, the things that we need to learn and know ourselves come up from within, they don't come from someone else, and almost across the board, unsolicited advice is not welcome and can be hurtful because we don't know, actually. I barely know for myself what it is, the meaning, the ongoing meaning of my life is. What I do know, but I would never say this to someone for their life story, but what I would say for mine is that stumbling stone that moved me from complacency into utter attention is probably the greatest treasure of my life.

Once I was asked, talk about stinging questions, "If you could have your husband and your daughter back, but you couldn't know what you know now, what you have been shown in response to that prayer, would you do it?" For me now, where I am, what I've seen, not only would I not do that, nor do I think in whatever realm their spirits exist would they want me to, this was the path that was given to me, but you don't ask that of anybody else or when people ask me about meeting the drunk driver and forgiveness and stuff, I always want to shrink from that because some people will hear it like, "Well, then I should be doing it that way." There's no that way. I want to say that so loud and clear, which is why you come to people with your presence and your love and you just sit and you listen.

Mike Petrow: That's so good. Oh, that's wonderful. Well, as our time is drawing to a close, our final question is born of something that we've heard from a lot of our listeners, from a lot of our students, and even some of our fellow staff who've worked on the podcast with us. It's this notion that as we read *Falling Upward* and we're learning about the different types of wisdom in the two halves of life or the different tables that we find ourselves sitting at, and we attempt to incorporate that wisdom, a lot of us find ourselves trying to live the wisdom of both halves of life at the same time.

Then we could take it a step further, especially in conversation with you, Paula, to recognize that there are some of us who perhaps are in the first half of life and something happens that forces us to deal with second half of life realities way ahead of schedule. The story that I bring to listening to your story is that I, 15 years ago, I lost my brother, and six months later to the day lost my mother, and it completely changed my life plan and the story that I thought I was living.

I think so many of our listeners, in particular with what we know of our audience, can relate to that in some way. I appreciated listening to you talk about in the aftermath of your loss, there was not a place that you could go that could meet everything that you were going through. I've heard you say you could find a group for grieving widows, but that wasn't necessarily a group for someone who'd lost a child or had a child coming or you could find a group for folks who were no longer in a marriage, but if they lost someone to a divorce, it's not the same, and so on and so forth.

So many of us hit those second half of life realities early and then don't have a support system of peers who are maybe going through that. So what advice would you give to our listeners who relate to that reality and who are trying to carry that maybe sooner, not on a classic schedule?

Paula D'Arcy: Certainly, I was 27, so I had never asked any of the ultimate questions in life, so I was doing all of my learning as it was happening. James Finley has a phrase that he's used many times when I've heard him speak that really is a solace for me. He says, "When you come to a fork in the road," which I think is the stumbling stone creates the fork, "you either will despair or you will go deeper, and everybody will have their own pace with that." The more compassion we have with that, it's like you wouldn't tell kids something beyond the moment in time that they were like at age 11 or I think of this often when many people who have the fortune of going to college away from home, and so they're of a certain age and they go out to find their place in the world, but the first year, many people will go home often. So it's like one foot in one place and one in another until the other becomes more stabilized.

I think that's the way that it is as we go through life. I think we'll always have, so to speak, a foot in both worlds because we are human and yet we have an indwelling God, and so there is a divine nature also there to nurture. What I anticipate for us as we evolve, what I think is the way ultimately these two things will marry is that as you become more stabilized in your surrender to what's guiding from within, that can be your eyes as you see what's happening in your human life so that you don't identify with it as if, "That's all that I am," because you know, "There's something within me that tells me I'm more than this. I'm more than Paula, I'm more than an author, I'm more than a mother, I'm more than a retreat leader." It's just the identity I've assumed in this lifetime. So then you can live in both worlds, but from the guidance of the inner world, not one world being that you're so caught up in it that you think, "That's who I am," if that's clear at all, but I love the question

Mike Petrow: That's brilliant and really deep, and also, we always love whenever Jim comes into the conversation, but this notion that this can put us in touch with ... For me, what I'm hearing is a reminder that it puts me in touch with a part of me that's timeless and that is powerful and comforting, and the one foot in both worlds also just that image, I can feel that in my bones.

Paul Swanson: Me too. That was such a beautiful response, and a bit of a funny image came to my mind of almost Twister, where you have one foot and one side, one foot in the other, but then your arm is somewhere in the middle and then there's a bunch of people playing, and sometimes you fall over and you got to start back up again and get back into the game. I think there's ways in which that plays well with the framework of the two halves of life, and that's all part of enveloping into something larger. That quote from Jim that you mentioned, just the

opportunity to keep going deeper and deeper is there.

I'll stew on this for a long time, so thank you so much, Paula, for your time today, for the gift of your presence and story and wisdom with us and how it's intersected with this book and also how you've lived it out in your own life and offered it through your teachings and writings to the world. It's a gift to be in conversation with you. Thank you so much for your time today.

Mike Petrow: This has been one of my favorite hours. Thank you.

Paula D'Arcy: I would say this back to both of you though. It's been a gift to have this conversation with you because you obviously were engaged with this, and so then we got to have a much bigger conversation because of that. So you were a remarkable joy to do this with. It's not always this way, so thank you.

Mike Petrow: Wow. I just can't even ... First of all, I want to say what an amazing progression of conversation the last few episodes have been just taking us deeper and deeper, and wow, we're not supposed to have favorites, but that was one of my favorite hours of being alive. So much depth and wisdom in the conversation we just got to participate in.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Paula has a unique grounded way of offering these timeless wisdom, sayings into conversation that they flow out of her naturally. Even as I step away from that conversation, they continue to swirl within me. They continue to instruct in ways that I maybe didn't see in the moment or they pop back as life presents itself, whether it's through my own stumbling stones or some tragic sense of life.

There's this line by Paula that I think we both deeply love and is often attributed to Richard, and he quotes it in this chapter where Paula says, "God comes to you disguised as your life." You can take that line in every aspect of your life, whether it's in spiritual life, work life, how you're showing up in times of joy or times of sorrow. How is God coming to you disguised as your life? Her story obviously holds a lot of weight with the unimaginable loss of a spouse and a child, and then having to move through that grief and also raising the child who survives that accident. Yet after all these years, we hear the different nuances of the grieving process, of the life-giving aspects that come as surprises within that. She embodies this incredible statement by her. How does that line resonate for you, Mike?

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious. It's so powerful. So last week, we left our listeners with this prompt to sit with their gratitude and their grief and their sorrow and their celebration. I recognized that when I look at her story, there's so much of all of that, and yet against all odds, this trust that it has all been taking her somewhere and the willingness to trust that God has come to her disguised as her life, to taking her on this trajectory where she now turns around and is taking her own healing and put it in the service of the healing of the world and so many of us.

I think about our listeners. There might be someone listening going, "Well, I haven't lost a child, much less a child and a spouse at the same time or a parent or a sibling," or, "I haven't had the degree of suffering and loss that Paula has," and yet we all in our own way have our sorrows and celebrations and our griefs and our gratitudes and the capacity to possibly

believe that divine is coming to us in all of it, in all the myriad moments of our life.

Paul Swanson: There's this theme, there's this through line that's been coming up for me in these conversations is as we embrace the fullness of reality, there's so much to be gleaned from and it can hurt and it can offer insight, but when being in conversation with Paula and seeing the ways that she has approached that through Rites of Passage, through grieving, through celebration, I see someone who has embraced the fullness of their humanity and not taken a route that doesn't also burrow into the depths of how she has met reality in those moments of tragedy and sorrow, but also the love that has flowed from moments that didn't seem like they were carrying that same impact.

Mike Petrow: This idea that God comes to us disguised as our life, it reminds me of this quote I love from Carl Jung where he says, "To this day, God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, upset my plans, upset my intentions, and change the course of my life for better or worse." What I hear in Paula that inspires me with all the tragedy that she's been through is the willingness to believe that this could be changing the course of life for better.

I think that's where what I'd like to leave our listeners with today is the courage to ask the question, "How have the wounds in my life potentially opened me up to new wisdom? How have the detours in my life potentially open me up to new direction?"

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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.