



# **EVERYTHING BELONGS**

**Necessary Suffering**  
with Mirabai Starr

Paul Swanson: The term necessary suffering sounds like a cruel joke or a way to excuse the subjugation of other beings, or perhaps the motto of dental offices everywhere. Approaching necessary suffering from another angle, we recognize that simply by being human and engaging with reality, we are bound to suffer. As agents of love, healing, and compassion, the suffering we meet becomes a necessary dance partner. Whether we acknowledge it, bear it, or crumble under it, life meets us with suffering. Father Richard minces no words on suffering. He has said that we suffer anytime we are not in control. Suffering can shut us down or soften our hearts, and if tended to, it can put us in solidarity with the suffering of the world. Necessary suffering can be both the crucible and the gate to the unified field. In today's conversation, it is with that spirit that we sit in Richard's hermitage, and crack open the conversation on chapter six, necessary suffering. We delve right into suffering, circling around both legitimate and illegitimate suffering, being in solidarity with suffering, and how embodied practice is essential to integrating the necessary suffering of our lives.

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

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs.

Richard, we're so excited to be here with you sitting outside in the breeze on your porch, taking in the beautiful New Mexico fall afternoon. And today we're going to be talking about necessary suffering. One of my favorite things that Carl Jung ever said, and it's always fascinated me, is he says that neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering. I got so excited when I read this chapter because you open it by saying, Carl Jung said that so much unnecessary suffering comes into the world because people will not accept the legitimate suffering that comes from being human. Legitimate suffering that comes from being human. That's so wild. In fact, he said that neurotic behavior is usually the result of refusing legitimate suffering. Ironically, this refusal of the necessary pain of being human brings to the person 10 times more suffering in the long run. So I have to ask you, what do you think is the difference between legitimate and illegitimate suffering?

Richard Rohr: I didn't expect you to ask it that way. I'm going to give what'll sound like I'm not answering it, but I hope I am. I think it's a message that parents need to give children when they have to do things they don't want to do. If you don't teach them that, they grow up entitled that I never deserve suffering. That suffering is always bad, always a punishment. I think parents are doing their children a tremendous, tremendous favor to say life is a certain amount of necessary suffering, and this is the only way you grow up. And they will believe that as a little child if daddy says that, or if mother says that. They might not like it, but they'll believe it. And you're helping that kid immensely because already when he goes to kindergarten, he's not the center of attention. He's got to start learning. So now ask me the question again.

Mike Petrow: So what's the difference between, and you're answering, which I appreciate, the difference between legitimate and illegitimate suffering? What does it mean that we suffer for the wrong things or for the wrong reasons? We do the wrong kind of suffering.

Richard Rohr: If you don't make that distinction, people can think they can be cruel to people, and this is necessary suffering. This doesn't give us the permission to make other people's lives hard.

I think you've heard me quote my novice master. Somewhere in the middle of the year he called me in his office and he says, well, Friar Alexander, that was my name. I want to give you a little bit of advice. You need to make it easier for people to love you. I figure I was a pious prig. Did I say that here before? I think I did.

Mike Petrow: I love when you used the word prig.

Richard Rohr: It isn't a commonly used word.

Mike Petrow: You're bringing it back.

Richard Rohr: The very fact that I remember that, that it's not our job to present our worst self and say deal with it. Let's make it easier for people to love us. That doesn't mean you have to suck up to people or kiss up to people, whatever the better phrase is. But why make it hard? Why be neurotic or narcissistic? That affected me very much.

Paul Swanson: So why didn't you take his advice?

Mike Petrow: I was just going to say, is this novice master still alive?

Richard Rohr: You are terrible.

Mike Petrow: Can we call this novice master to talk to Richard again?

Richard Rohr: He's dead. He's buried back in Cincinnati, humble man that he was. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: What was the effect on that? Do you remember how that the aftermath shortly thereafter? You said it left an impact, it's clearly stayed with you for all these years. How did you begin to make yourself more open to love and in that vulnerability?

Richard Rohr: I remember one thing, and this is probably characteristic, well one, I hope I'm not still doing it, but I tended to make absolute statements. They are always that way. We haven't had the civil rights movement yet or any feminism. So it was easy to talk with generalities. And I think I did a lot and I can remember they said, Rich or Alexander, it isn't always that way. I said, well, okay, I know that, but I think that was my main fault. When I'd come to a conclusion, I'd absolutize it. Now I see that in other people and it just is obnoxious to me because that's in me to make overgeneralizations, and not just generalize them but absolutize them. It's always this way. She's always that way. I remember Friar Angelo especially said, "Richard." That was the later years. "She isn't always that way." Oh, okay. And he was doing me a favor.

Paul Swanson: Taking this theme of necessary suffering or I like legitimate and illegitimate suffering. How has the church been supportive or challenging to learning that for you and in general? Do you feel like that's a lesson that the church teaches well? We have the crucified Jesus embodying a certain place of suffering, the suffering servant, but yet also we recognize that suffering has sometimes been imposed on by the powers that be. How do you feel like the church holds that space of acknowledging legitimate and illegitimate suffering?

Richard Rohr: My guess is we point to the cross too quickly, too glibly. It's true, and a person who's

emotionally healthy, familiarly healthy, they could deal with the cross. But if you had it in any way punitive parents or there was abuse in the family, even verbal or emotional, that language of the cross just isn't helpful to you because it all gets into the thing of punishment, and certain people deserve punishment. I would say most human beings seem to think that way. People in jail deserve to be punished, so it's my job to inflict necessary suffering on bad people. All we got to do is prove they're bad. So even today, I hate to bring it home so much, but it's legitimate now massacring the Hamas and the Palestinians because they've done something bad. If all you need is an excuse, you'll always find it. But if you have a pre-existing code like Jesus gives us that, no, you just don't go there. You don't inflict pain on other people and you don't look for an excuse that justifies it. Most people look for an excuse that justifies it.

Mike Petrow: I think there's something in a worldview that a lot of Western people live in, that they experience all suffering as punishment.

Richard Rohr: Yes. That was my major point. Go ahead.

Mike Petrow: Right. It's like we start from this idea that I shouldn't be suffering. Well, if I believe that I shouldn't be suffering, then anytime anything bad happens to me, I want to know why and I want to know who did something wrong, or if I did something wrong to cause that.

Richard Rohr: That's the heart of the matter right there, and that's why necessary suffering undoes that and says, no, it's the nature of the universe. You don't, you can't always get life and more life and more life. Life cannot be enjoyed unless it's experienced along with some death, and I think that's really true.

Mike Petrow: I will say it was when I studied Buddhism and the first, I think it's the first noble truth of Buddhism, the notion that suffering is unavoidable. It changed my whole worldview because when suffering just became a part of the package, I didn't take it as personally. I wasn't always looking for reasons.

Richard Rohr: You're saying it much better than I said it. Go ahead.

Mike Petrow: What's interesting is I'd love your thoughts on this. It changed the way that I saw the cross. Buddhism totally changed the way that I saw the cross because I stopped seeing the cross as something explaining to me why suffering happened, and I started seeing it as God's solidarity and participation in our suffering, showing us how to carry our own suffering. Does that make sense?

Richard Rohr: Not only makes sense, that I believe is a very mature understanding. The cross is God's solidarity with human suffering, not punishment for bad behavior. But nine out of 10 people... Like you'll hear a crack of thunder and you know the remark, well, God's a little upset with what you just said. Why do we always have to see everything as God being upset?

Paul Swanson: The way you define suffering in some of your other work is anytime you're out of control. And that's such a helpful reframe because I think suffering can often just take on the smiting of God or of another person. Can you say a little bit more about

suffering as being out of control?

Richard Rohr: The unevolved person, the immature person, is always egocentric, and they see everything as either reward or punishment toward this, this self that I think I am. To learn early on that you're only a part and you're just like everybody else, and you don't have to take everything as punishment or reward, is a great freedom. It's just, well, you just said it better than I. This is the nature of the flow. Look at a stream and there's all this backslash as it keeps hitting a rock, moving the other direction, and we call them rapids. I think it is necessary backslash to have a beautiful river, little bits of oppositional flow.

Mike Petrow: If you think about this great insight that Paul just pointed out, it is one of my favorite things that you teach, that suffering is anytime we're not in control, and everything you just said about the backslash and the flow. I think about you as you've been dealing the last few years with a series of health challenges. I imagine you've had to let go of a lot of a sense of control in your life. Would you mind sharing with us how that's been for you?

Richard Rohr: Why is it that it's not ringing true to me? It wasn't loss of control. I'm ashamed to say this, it's more loss of comfort. Comfort. Just like all Americans, I've grown used to sitting on a padded chair and when so much of my life now is uncomfortable, I hope you agree with me. I don't think I have strong control needs, but I have strong comfort needs. When it's too hot in the room, I want to turn on the air conditioner and I'm a terribly spoiled un-Franciscan American. I've come to see this and that it isn't good, but I still would prefer comfort to discomfort.

Paul Swanson: You become a spoiled prig.

Richard Rohr: A pious prig.

Paul Swanson: A pious prig.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh.

Richard Rohr: See, God is ringing agreement with what we're saying in the ringing of the bells.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh.

Paul Swanson: That comfort, it is so much of what the American life is about.

Richard Rohr: It really is.

Paul Swanson: The American way is more of comfort than even of ascension.

Richard Rohr: Even than control.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, you want to be comfortable at all times.

Richard Rohr: I shouldn't be inconvenienced.

Paul Swanson: Yes. And I think to get back to what you were saying earlier, Mike, of love leads us to that solidarity, which is the cross, right?

Richard Rohr: With people who have no choice over inconvenience.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Paul Swanson: Winners and losers is no longer part of the conversation, but it's solidarity. Love leads us to that place.

Richard Rohr: And if I can bring that thought into my mind, let's enjoy this for the sake of a guy who's in jail for 25 years and has no choice. It changes. It works. But if I don't do that, I just start frittering away with irritation because I have to wait in this long line. Yeah, it's terrible.

Mike Petrow: One of the things I also love about this chapter is you talk about how Jesus talks about you find your life by losing it, and you talk about how suffering takes us out of the false self into the true self. You asked this great question, how much false self are you willing to shed to find your true self? And I wonder about does our false self hide in these senses of comfort and letting ourselves have the illegitimate suffering get bent out of shape about things that don't really matter?

Richard Rohr: That's a very good insight. Does our false self hide? Yes, because it looks legitimate to want to rush through a line. Why is that? Well, you've heard my story here at Five Points. Are you going to be any happier on the other side of the street? And I still tell that story to myself when I'm in... Well, I don't drive anymore, but when I did.

Mike Petrow: And our listeners may or may not know that story, but you're talking about the world's longest traffic light here at Five Points.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Here on the corner.

Mike Petrow: You want to tell the story again?

Richard Rohr: There's a Five Point road entrance and it's very long. And in the days when I used to drive, I'd go through it a lot going to the post office. And one day it seemed especially interminable, and I sat there and I felt I heard a voice. I didn't, but I felt I did. And it said, "Richard, will you be any happier on the other side of this street?" If I can rush through when I get over there, it is going to change in a minute or so. Are you really filled with joy on the other side? No. That was a big lesson for me to just recognize that's my ego that wants to get over there. For what reason? I don't know. Yeah, there are little ways we can teach ourselves, aren't there?

Paul Swanson: That story of Jim Forrest. Remember Jim finally asked-

Richard Rohr: Oh yes, he was in my kitchen once.

Paul Swanson: Oh really?

Richard Rohr: At New Jerusalem. Yes.

Paul Swanson: He tells a story of when he was washing dishes and Thich Nhat Hanh was visiting and they're having this great conversation out in the living room, but it was his night to do dishes. So he was grumpily doing the dishes because he wanted to participate in the lively generative conversation with Thich Nhat Hanh. Apparently Thich Nhat Hanh stepped out into the kitchen and said, Jim, when you're doing the dishes, do the dishes. He was calling him to presence, which I feel like is very much what you're saying.

Richard Rohr: He sensed that though.

Paul Swanson: He sensed that and went and just kind of called him to, not to task, but invited him to do the dishes when you're doing the dishes, and not be somewhere else. Yeah. Yeah. I love that story. It's so much of the practicality of our everyday life, these little inconveniences or little sufferings or once we get over this hurdle, then I'll be okay, then I'll be happy.

Richard Rohr: And it's a lie.

Paul Swanson: It's a lie.

Richard Rohr: It isn't. Merton said the same. When I chop wood, I chop wood. When I pour water, I pour water.

Mike Petrow: I've been thinking about this a lot lately that sometimes one of the critiques of a lot of contemplative Christianity is that there's not enough embodied practice. But when you think about that, when you think about what Merton said, when you think about Brother Lawrence, you think about Origen who says that the only way to pray continuously is when you realize all life is prayer. Embodied practice is everything. It's sitting at the traffic light, it's doing the dishes, it's waiting 20 minutes for your podcasters to show up because they're running late, and not being grumpy with them when they arrive.

Richard Rohr: I always do that. Wait very patiently.

Mike Petrow: And that's that. But it's an interesting thing to think about the frustrations and the sufferings that show up in the course of a day, whether giant or small, as practice, as our embodied practice.

Richard Rohr: It's absolutely true. Little irritations, little discomforts, little that's not the way I would like it, as if it matters what you like. I say that to myself sometimes, not enough.

Mike Petrow: I feel like we did it, Richard. Thank you for the gift of your presence as we explore necessary suffering, which is not to say that your presence is necessary suffering.

Paul Swanson: Not at all, especially not on this porch. Thank you, Richard.

Mike Petrow: Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Today we're joined by Mirabai Starr, an award-winning author, contemporary translator of sacred literature, international speaker, and a world-renowned teacher of contemplative practice, an interspiritual dialogue. A certified bereavement counselor. Mirabai helps

mourners harness the transformational power of loss. Her latest book is *Wild Mercy, Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics*. And her book coming out the fall of 2024 is *Ordinary Mysticism, Your Life as Sacred Ground*.

Mirabai, thank you so much for being here. You've been such a friend to the CAC for many years.

Mirabai Starr: It's a joy to be with you all always.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it's such a pleasure. It's always endearing, enlightening, and my heart expands when we're together. But I can't remember the first time that I met you, but I do know that, and I'm embarrassed to say this, that I showed up a little skeptical because I was raised in a way where you should only go deep in one tradition. And you quickly relieved me of that assumption through your teaching, through your presence and the friendship that we have. And you also gave me spot-on parenting advice, which I don't remember exactly what it was, but what I recall in times of need is the gaze of love, and which you looked at me as you shared that advice with me. And I think you do this as a teacher and as a presence, and knowing that you've circled around CAC for a long time, been a part of events, been a part of teachings. I'm curious, how did you first get connected to the CAC and to Richard? Do you remember?

Mirabai Starr: It's so funny, Paul, that you confess to that initial skepticism that you had with me because that mirrors the initial skepticism I had with the CAC.

Mike Petrow: I was really hoping you were going to say the initial skepticism you had with Paul. Really excited for that.

Paul Swanson: That'll come next.

Mike Petrow: Okay, great.

Mirabai Starr: No, never. Look at that face. I did not for one second did I not believe in his total goodness and intelligence and humor. I don't know. I live in New Mexico and so I'd heard about the CAC forever and I just kept my distance. I think also it, again, to mirror your comment, Paul, about me going into all of these different spiritual and religious spaces, I was cautious about Christianity and about tying my camel too close to any one tradition, but especially that one. I grew up in a family of non-religious, actually anti-religious secular Jews, and Christianity of all the spiritual traditions was kind of the most dangerous in my family culture. But here's what happened, I think, is that I did a little book for Sounds True called *St. Francis of Assisi, Brother of Creation*. And Sounds True asked me to do it.

It was like so many of my books, very strange kind of karma I have here, was an invitation by the publisher. So I hadn't necessarily sat down to do a book about St. Francis, but I had always been madly in love with St. Francis from the time I was a young teenager. And so I did this little book of favorite quotes and passages and stories of St. Francis with my own kind of poetic reflections. And they asked Richard Rohr to write the foreword. He did, and it was beautiful. And shortly after that, we were together at a conference in Santa Fe, I think it was Spiritual Directors International. I don't remember exactly. I think that's what it was.



We were both keynote speakers and for some reason Richard was sitting alone at breakfast on the first morning. And I had just seen the book. It had just come out and I'd read his foreword and I was so moved by it, and it dismantled any preconceptions I had about Richard Rohr. And I sat down and we had breakfast together and we just fell into each other's hearts. And then it was a three-day conference. We had breakfast together every morning, and it was like the beginning of this just very alive connection between us. It felt like we had known each other forever, and it went on unfolded from there.

Paul Swanson: That's so beautiful. Thank you for sharing that origin story. It's always fun to hear because it often happens over a breaking of bread, or some coincidence or supposed coincidence of folks finding each other that need to fall into one another's hearts like that. That's just so beautiful.

Mike Petrow: I love that. Well, speaking of breaking of bread and falling each other's hearts, Mirabai, you know you are so my favorite. And I love the story of how we became friends because I kind of ended up by accident at a retreat where you were one of the keynote teachers. And I ended up by accident standing next to you in line for lunch. And the truth of the story is I leaned over to you and said, "Hey, can I ask you a really nerdy ass question?" And you said, "Sure, I guess." And I asked you this really, really detailed question about Hesychastic and Desert Christianity and its influence on Sufism in Islam. And you looked at me and tilted your head and said, "That is a really nerdy ass question, but I'm the right person to ask." And we had a great conversation. And then later at the retreat I walked up to you with tears in my eyes and I said, "I have to ask you what your thoughts are.

Why is it that so many of us in the spiritual path have had so much suffering in our life, and is there something about the spiritual path that raises a lightning rod to the cosmos and brings more suffering in?" And again, you tilted your head and you looked at me and said, "Do you know my work?" And I said, "I feel like I want to get to know your work." And you recommended that I read Caravan of No Despair. We'll get to your work and we'll get to the answer that you gave me to that question. But I felt such immediate trust when I learned about your story. And so if you don't mind, and I feel so terrible starting off our conversation. This chapter is unnecessary suffering. I feel so terrible going, Mirabai, tell us about all the loss and suffering in your life? And yet for our listeners who maybe don't know your story, could you tell us a little bit about your journey with the loss of loved ones, and how that's shaped who you are in the world?

Mirabai Starr: Yes, and to me it's not heavy. It's not even sad. It's sad, but it's much more than sad. So I do not hesitate to share the story, but I have to say two quick reflections first, Michael. One is you are dear to me too, incredibly dear to me, and I am so blessed to know you and have you in my life. The second thing is when you came up to me with that second question about suffering and the spiritual path, it wasn't just that triggered me to hold forth. It wasn't just a catalyst for me to hold forth on my views on suffering and spirituality. What the first and most real thing about that exchange was, I knew you were asking it for a reason. When anyone asks me a question like that, and especially in the case with you, because we have such a deep soul bond immediately, I knew that that came from a place of too much loss.

And I get to say that. I get to argue with reality sometimes and say, no, that is too much, one after another, after another. And I think many of you listening have had those seasons of too

muchness in your heart, where it was loss after loss and challenge after challenge. So yes, I've had one of those lifetimes too, and it started young. When I was seven years old, my older brother, Matty, who was nine, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Matty was my big brother. He was the oldest in a family of four. He was everything to me, my hero, my mythic. It was the mythic big brother. In the beautiful sense of big brother. Matty died a year later when he was 10, and I was almost eight. I guess I was six and a half when he was diagnosed, and I was seven and a half when he died.

And that marked my life and our whole family, of course. I became the default eldest. I took that role very seriously, way, way, way too seriously, still do in my sixties. But it was more than just the way that a bomb went off and reconfigured our whole family. It also granted me access to this numinous realm. Of course, at seven years old, you're not that far from the numinous anyway, right? Children still have. It's that proximity to the other world is very real. But it created this kind of sacred relationship with death, is all I can say. And then when I was 14, my first love died, Philip, in a gun accident here in Taos where I still live. And that was the shattering event that catapulted me onto a spiritual path. I became a meditator and a yogini and a practitioner of Sufism, and all of the different wisdom ways like my hair was on fire, as they say. And Buddhism, I plunged in.

And then my father died when I was 30. And many dear friends, dear, dear friends. And then when I was 40, just 40. Oh no, yeah, I was well into 40. Talk about first half of life and second. My fourteen-year-old daughter Jenny was killed in a car accident. So there was no preparation, no way to prepare myself to meet that moment except that, and we can talk about this later if you wish. The very day that Jenny died was the day that my first book, which happened to be a translation of *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, another powerful connection between Richard and me, was released into the world. I had just finished translating it and I had just received my first advance copy the day that Jenny died. And so to wrap up this part, those two events braided together with my spiritual life in such a way that they are now inextricable.

Paul Swanson: Thanks Mirabai for sharing that and for knowing how that lands so gently on all of our listeners' ears, that as they've gone through their own suffering, how they can connect to the ways in which you have gone through, and embody what it looks like to work with that deep grief throughout your life. And we're going to touch on so many things that you've just shared. It's almost like a dough before us that we're going to knead throughout this time together, and let rise in different ways.

I've been cheering on your work from the sidelines of *Holy Lament*, the Transformative Path of Loss and Longing. It's so beautiful to see what you and Willow and your team have created there. And it directly correlates to this chapter in following up with necessary suffering. And the way we each experience loss and longing in this life, whether it's dumb luck, circumstantial, or risking a life of deep incarnational love. And I think that there's any shred of love that's sought, offered, received, or enjoyed, opens us up to loss, longing, and necessary suffering. In your experience as a grief counselor and spiritual teacher, how does bearing witness to the suffering in self and others encourage, while also challenging your own transformative path?

Mirabai Starr: The second part of that description of *Holy Lament*, our online grief community, grief is a

spiritual path, is the connection between loss and longing. Longing for what? We can call it God. It's, as you beautifully named, love. And as Richard always says, love is what God is in our lived experience. And therefore the connection between our deepest losses and our yearning for union, wanting as Julian of Norwich so beautifully calls it, with the beloved is what unfolds in the wake of a shattering loss. At least it does for me and for so many people. I used to think I was special in that way, that whenever I've experienced a fundamental shattering profound loss, it opens my heart to this fire of longing for God. And lo and behold, so many people I sit with as a grief guide, I don't like to say counselor so much.

It sounds therapy oriented and it isn't. What I often say about my work with grieving people, bereaved people, is that it's much more about transformation than it is about consolation. There are other places you can go to feel better, but to me grief is not a problem to be solved or a malady to be cured. It's a sacred reality to be entered. And so for so many of us, there is this opening to that, our soul's innate birthright, I would even say, of longing for God. That often gets covered over by everyday life and all of the responsibilities and the massive to-do list, and just the complacency of being a human being. And when we experience a profound loss, it strips us of those coverings, of those impediments I almost feel like they are, to a profound loving intimacy with the divine. And intimacy of any kind is going to be fraught with impermanence and the specter of loss. And then the reality of loss because we cannot stay in that melded place in this life.

So there's this beautiful dance and we see it in all the world's religions of coming together and separating again. Of the bliss of union, which is also the dissolving of our individual identities into the one, yam, what a precious fleeting experience that is. And then the separating again and the remembrance of that. But some mystics, I think of Ramakrishna who is a great early 20th century saint from India. And he spoke about non-duality and duality and he said, you know what the truth is, I don't want to become sugar. I want to taste sugar. And so that's what this is.

It's that longing for God is the taste of sugar. The union, the wanting, the dissolving of the illusion of the separate self and those fleeting moments where we get to merge into that divine consciousness, whether it's standing on the rim of the Rio Grande gorge and looking down into the river, and forgetting for a moment that we're separate from that river, or sitting in meditation and having one of those moments of what Teresa of Avila calls the prayer of quiet. When we just get to abide in that ocean of love. Whatever our experience of wanting is, later is not a problem. Separation is part of that divine dance.

Mike Petrow: I love this so much, Mirabai, and I have loved... Little advertisement here. I've loved you and I have gotten a chance to talk about that in some of our conversations for the Living School. And I love how such similar things have come up in our conversations about grief as a spiritual path, in our conversations about the dark night of the soul, but also in our conversations about the mystical love that's revealed in the long tradition of the Song of Songs as a mystical text, this deep love. And one of the things that's also come up in our conversations with Richard up to this point, in talking about falling upward. Richard talks about these two great powerfully transformative spiritual paths of great love and great suffering. And what we see is that great love and great suffering are not separate paths. They're deeply intertwined. So I say all that to lead into the observation that this week's chapter is necessary suffering.

Richard opens the chapter with this statement, Carl Jung said that so much unnecessary suffering comes into the world because people will not accept the legitimate suffering that comes from being human. In fact, he said neurotic behavior is usually the result of refusing that legitimate suffering. Ironically, this refusal of the necessary pain of being human brings to the person 10 times more suffering in the long run. And I cannot help but pause and wonder and, Mirabai and Paul, I'd love your thoughts on both of this. If part of the refusal of accepting that is refusing to bear this longing for love, and the grief of having a heart open to love that has to experience loss. And so I want to start here. Mirabai, grief as a spiritual path is a huge part of your work and I love how you've connected it for us. Just to pause before we jump in further, how would you define grief?

Mirabai Starr: Grief is the natural arising of the heart in response to great loss. It's a response of sometimes unbearable love in the face of a shattering, life-changing loss. And life-changing is essential, whether it's subtle or dramatic, everything changes in response to a profound loss, or to any loss really. Any loss. And loss takes many forms.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Oh, well, and I love the idea that we grieve because we love. And if we love, we will experience loss. And would you say more about that, Mirabai, that loss can take many forms?

Mirabai Starr: Right. Well, it's easy to see the loss that takes the form of a loved one dying. And that is indeed a profoundly reconfiguring cataclysmic event for many people. Even if it's a death that seems like it's in its right time, so to speak, the death of an elder. Even it's the death of someone you weren't close to but was an important part of your life, meaning a parent or a sibling. Even if it was the death of someone who was abusive and in many ways this world is better now that they're gone. Death is complicated and powerful. It is that threshold space that we get to experience sometimes between this world and a larger reality that we've always intuited to be true.

So it's sacred no matter what. It brings us into sacred space whether we like it or not. But there are many other losses. That breakup of a relationship is one of the most excruciating losses, whether you initiated it or were the one that was left. A serious health diagnosis that changes everything. An injury also that reweaves the way life used to be. I guess that any kind of loss that involves the death of who we used to be is a powerful catalyst for this kind of encounter with the sacred that I'm speaking of.

Mike Petrow: I love what you just said there, that any kind of loss that involves the death of who we used to be, and that change in our life does change who we are. That's extraordinary. And since this week's talking about necessary suffering and how many of us cause extra suffering by running away from that, do you think, Mirabai, that we're culturally prompted to avoid facing that grief and loss?

Mirabai Starr: You just read my little mind, Mike. We're an extremely grief-phobic culture, and it doesn't help to have the religions on top of it saying, go this way. There lies transcendence. You can meditate your way out of your pain. You can pray your way through to relief from suffering. In fact, you can bypass it all together if you buy into this set of beliefs or practices or faith claims. And so the combination of the grief illiteracy in the culture, and the emphasis, dare I say, of the patriarchal religious structures to get us to rise above the messy realities of our

humanity, is a recipe for avoiding grief. Which is going to, I agree with Richard, a gazillion percent is going to create more suffering later. And there's another, the flip side of that is when we tell ourselves stories about our suffering, elaborate narratives to either put ourselves in an understandably victim stance sometimes, or to blame others, or to resent. There's so many ways that losses can trigger resentments.

All of those things are examples of what I think in Buddhism is called dukkha dukkha, double suffering. So dukkha loosely translated from Pali, the language of the Buddha, is suffering. And that is what the Buddha recognized is kind of the essential truth, the first one, the first noble truth of the four noble truth. The truth of suffering, that this life does involve suffering. But what is noticed in Buddhism, which has so much psychological savvy and wisdom, is that there's pure suffering, which is a natural response to great loss, to sorrow, to pain. And then there is dukkha dukkha, double suffering, the suffering that comes when we tell ourselves all about it.

That monkey mind that just goes on and on and around and around and can't let go. And Richard's really alluding to that in this chapter. That when we can be with our pure experience as it is, and that's the way of the contemplative, is to be with things as they are. Not to meditate our way into a coma, but the opposite. To show up for things as they are. Then this spaciousness, as Pema Chodron describes, expands around the experience so that we can contain it. And the stories, stories, I love stories. Stories are my trade. I'm a writer. So it's not stories in and of themselves, or even the story of your grief and your loss. That can be beautiful and powerful and life giving to others. I'm talking about that monkey mind loop where we can't stop going over and over how things could have been different, is the way that story usually sounds.

Paul Swanson: That's so striking. I'm loving this invitation to sit with in the grief of the moment and to be attuned enough to know that this is part of the expanse of work that one gets to do by paying attention, by being a human being, the humanness of it all. One of my favorite authors, David James Duncan, he talks about when we learn to surrender our heart and have faith in this heart, that it unfolds in a very unscientific manner, but into a vast and pristine wilderness. And I think of... He's so poetic in his writing. I think of that wilderness of the heart, that vastness of being able to see the grief of just wilderness that takes place of loss and renewal, and joy and communion.

And there's something that I feel like has to be stripped away of all the things we add onto the wilderness of the heart. We try to gentrify or we try to build tall buildings to overtake this wilderness of the heart. Richard calls necessary suffering, the surrendering of the false self, this relative identity. Is that something that you also would define it that way, or how would you spin necessary suffering in relationship to the false self?

Mirabai Starr: Ironically, paradoxically and beautifully, it seems to be the case that when we experience a great loss, it connects us with the whole of the human family. And so even though each loss and everyone's path of grief is unique and special and sacred and powerful, it doesn't mean that we are isolated in our own little universe of suffering, and that nobody could possibly understand. When we breathe into the truth of what we're experiencing, we cannot help, I feel, but notice that we belong to each other. That we belong to the, as Mary Oliver says, that the family of things. To creation, because not just the human family, but all of creation,

that we all experience loss.

But let's come back to humans for a minute because humans uniquely experience sorrow and grief and longing for the sacred. And so let's get specific. What I experienced when my daughter died was two things. One was nobody could possibly know what I'm going through right now. But quickly on the heels of that was, oh, every person ever who has experienced the death of a child. In my case, that's what that I was realizing in the bones of my own body.

And in fact mothers, in my case. That there had been mothers throughout time and there were mothers right now. Jenny died right after 9/11, right before the US invaded Iraq. During the beginning of that war, I was so viscerally aware of other mothers, particularly in the Middle East and in places where war was breaking out, who were experiencing what I was experiencing, and had throughout time. And here's the other part that my mother heart recognized, would for all time to come. And that we all belong to each other. And in some ways that was the first time I ever took my seat in the web of interbeing.

And realized that I belong here and we belong to each other. And even if right now it was my turn to be held by that web, I knew somehow, couldn't imagine it yet, but somehow, someday I would be able to do some of that holding of the other mothers to come. And indeed I have and do. Yeah, the false self is the self that suffer, in my mind, the self that suffers from the illusion of separation from God, which means from each other and from all life. And a profound loss can dismantle that whole false structure. Just break it down. And it does kill us in the process in some ways. Kills the self that thinks it's separate.

Mike Petrow: Mirabai, I alluded to this first conversation you and I have that really sort of launched our friendship. And in my own journey, I love when you say things like, it's just one of those reincarnations. It's just in my own journey, there has been a lot of death and a lot of loss. And I was raised in a religious system where I was always told that God had a plan for my life, and that everything that happened in my life was for my education and for my transformation, and that it was taking me somewhere. And so always wrestling with this, everything that happens is for my benefit, it's teaching me something. Well, then why? My God, if God is good and God has a plan for my life, why is the plan so hard? And if everything belongs, why does it hurt so much? And I remember this moment of saying to you, is there something about the spiritual path that draws more suffering to you?

And what I was asking is, is that it? We choose to walk this path and then we sign up to have more suffering, and the suffering turns us into the people that we're supposed to be to walk this path. And that's my double dukkha. My suffering upon suffering is not only are bad things happening to me, but I feel like the universe itself is orchestrating all these things to teach me something. And I asked you that question and you asked me if I knew your work. And you suggested that I read your memoir. And then you said, "Honey, my belief is that shit just happens. The universe is not out to get you, but suffering does supercharge your spiritual life." You liberated me, in that single conversation, from the unnecessary suffering of feeling like there was a divine conspiracy that had put a target on my head. Can I ask you to share more about that beautiful, deep wisdom of shit just happens, but it can energize your spiritual life?

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. I think that like you, Michael, everyone is listening goes, yep, that is true for me too. I cannot deny that gates have flown open on their hinges and after, sometimes way after, a difficult experience. And I think that many of us, whether in an evangelical Christian space or other spaces, have wondered if, by virtue of saying yes to the spiritual life, we're also inviting greater challenges and suffering into our lives. Or the other version of that story is, and this is more in the eastern spiritual spaces of Hinduism and Buddhism, that I chose a difficult incarnation in order to get to the top of the mountain more directly. It's more direct steep path. And I grew up with that one. So either version puts outside of ourselves the source of our spiritual growth. And so I guess what we're doing here is reclaiming our own agency and sovereignty and power even in saying, okay, shit happens.

What am I going to do? How am I going to till that compost into some kind of fertile soil? But here's the trick. That sounds laborious, doesn't it? And it is. There is an element of labor intensiveness to that, but it's also, I don't know, a spontaneous outflowing of the heart, I feel. In response to great suffering, the heart may be blasted open. Of course there's an element of grace there. It doesn't always happen. But when it does, we're invited into this co-creative relationship with the divine, I feel at that point.

Like, okay, I will cleanse the mirror of my heart with all of the methods that have been given to me by the grace of God. She's very generous that way. There's all kinds of contemplative practices and beautiful scriptures and so on, each other. And I lay myself at your feet beloved, and you make of me what you will in your incredible creative artistry. We'll do this together. And so the labor part is you're not laboring alone. That's the patriarchy that says we've got to just go into the desert and suffer and figure it out. And wrestle with the demons. Now we do it in community. We do it in intimate partnership with the divine. What is that phrase in Arabic? I don't remember in Arabic, but the translation is, trust in Allah and tie your camel. We do both.

Mike Petrow: I so appreciate that. And I love this notion of pivoting from why is this happening to me or why is the divine out to get me? Why is the divine doing this to me? To what can I do with this? And how is the divine meeting me in this? But I also appreciate what you said, Mirabai, so many friends and very deeply respected people in my life that I love, ascribe to this belief that before you were born, you chose everything that would happen to you. And I respect that. And also I want say to those people, if you want to choose that for yourself, it's beautiful. Please be gentle before you put that on another human who's suffering. To have someone in the midst that they're suffering and be like, just remember before you were born, you chose this. I'm like, oh my God, slow your roll on that one. Mirabai, can I ask you to say a word about that?

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. It may be true that I chose this, but I changed my mind. I take it back. I don't want to have to learn to love God by losing a child. No. So that's a really good example, Michael, of the kind of spiritual bullshit that we're fed sometimes. And it sounds right. And so we go, okay, but then we use it to beat ourselves up later, and each other like you're implying. And you're right, people get to believe whatever they believe, but the last thing you want to do to a freshly bereaved person is mansplain to them that this was a sacred contract that they signed in another world.

Paul Swanson: And some of this I feel like points back to some of the toxic images of God. There's this

God who really loves to motivate with a stick, versus this God of love who steep us in the vividness and vivaciousness of love, that a full acceptance before we do anything as the grounds for our own transformation. And you alluded to earlier your translation of Dark Night of the Soul, which I adore. That translation really made John come alive for me. And there's ways in which that's become a cultural thing to say, I'm going through a dark night of the soul where it's meant one thing. And then how would you explain that phrase, dark night of the soul? And whether in the own context of your life and about how that came out right as Jenny's accidents happened. What did we mean by the dark night of the soul? What did John mean by it in comparison to say the cultural expression of like, I'm kind of going through a crisis of something right now?

Mirabai Starr: Right, right. Well, it's a luminous darkness, which is the title of the book that I did with the CAC a couple of years ago. Luminous Darkness, the Teachings of John of the Cross. It's the great paradox of the mystical tradition. This is another way that you asked my origin story with Richard Rohr, that drew Richard and me together all these years ago, was our mutual love of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich, that beautiful little Trinity that we both adore and has shaped both of our spiritual lives so profoundly. But John of the Cross is speaking about a profound spiritual crisis that may or may not be visible on the outside. In other words, it may not be in response to some external event that happens, that plunges us into a dark night of the soul, but rather as this kind of natural unfolding on our spiritual paths, where somewhere along the line we have to let go of our attachments to the ways that we were accustomed to feeling the presence of the divine.

He calls that the night of sense, the spiritual goodies that we are used to getting when we meditate or chant or read scripture or something. And the other part of the night, what John calls the more advanced version of the dark night of the soul, the night of spirit is when all of our conceptual constructs come undone and collapse. All of our belief systems that we've hung our whole spiritual lives on just don't hold up anymore. And often we're surprised and deeply disturbed by this deconstruction that's happening whether we like it or not. So what John says, what's happening? We feel like we're being plunged into darkness. We can't feel the divine presence anymore. We can't even conceive of God anymore. Nothing makes sense, spiritually speaking. We're abiding like Jonah in the belly of the great beast, just suspended in this seeming darkness, impenetrable darkness.

And we can't meditate our way out of it. We can't contemplate our way through it. There's no remedy. This John says is what's really happening is that we're being stripped of the obstacles of sensory attachment and pre-conceptions about God, and having a naked encounter with the reality of divine love. And that reality of divine love is pure radiance. It's blinding at first. We can't perceive it directly, like Plato's allegory of the cave. When the prisoner gets free and emerges into the sunlight, it's blinding. You've all experienced it. You come from a dark room into a light room. So that luminous darkness is where we meet the holy one intimately and directly. That's what the dark night of the soul is about. However, and I'll leave you with this, until my daughter died, as you said coinciding, as you reiterated, coinciding with this release of my translation into the world.

I realized that a great loss, a shattering loss, can in fact be the catalyst for the spiritual crisis known as the dark night of the soul, in the sense that deep sorrow and trauma are like a stripping agent, like an acid on the heart. And they take away those coverings and we are



invited into, or we melt into a much more direct and intimate proximity to the reality of love. We're granted this special access to that naked spiritual space when we experience a great loss. It's not guaranteed, but it's invited. And what are we going to say when that invitation comes? And if we say, okay, yes, I will show up for this. If we do it out to try to prove how spiritual we are, how robust and strong we are, and macho, spiritually speaking, that's not going to do it. It's a yielding. It's a mothering darkness that we're dwelling in, and it's a response of the heart that is going to lead us into the arms of love.

Mike Petrow: I love that so much. And I think, see if I can stumble my way through this question. In thinking about the containers that break down, that put us into this place of raw, pure experience of love, and then the fact that we still have to cycle back to some of those containers. I have a very practical question if that's okay? I think about I am a person of faith who genuinely believes this life is a hospital and a classroom, and it's very often the relationships around us that are our teachers. And in this chapter, Richard has a section on he calls hating family, I think. And it's this quote from Jesus that you have to hate your family, which is poetic language. And I think what Richard and Jesus are getting at is the fact that family is very often the crucible and the teacher first of great love and great suffering.

And I think about how so many of us in our falling upward journey have to go through recognizing the family that we choose. Both of you chose to be married, chose to have children. The family we lose, whether in losing a parent or losing a child. The family we choose to lose, which so many of us I think have had this experience where we've had to make a change and step away from a family member, even a close family member, a parent or a sibling, and say, for us to have a healthy journey, we need to not be in communication. And then the family that chooses us. And so many of us live in the spaces of found family. Mirabai, you're like family to me. I'm so grateful for our connection. Well, and then even I want to say in the family that chooses us to the family we choose of choosing ancestors to be a part of our guide. Does that question make sense? And if so, what do you think about how this path of losing and choosing and finding family becomes a teacher for all of this? Does that track?

Mirabai Starr: Sure. It's interesting, writing a bunch of books and giving a bunch of talks. And I have this, I don't know image. So the Mirabai Starr illusion. And I often chuckle about how people think I'm somebody because I am nobody except who I am in my family of Starrs, in the Starr family. My family is my culture. They're my community. I feel inextricable from my mother and father and sister and brother, and not everybody has that. I'm sort of surprised often when people are little satellites outside of their family. I don't know who I am except in that. And I think part of that came from losing a brother so early on. My parents' first child and my older sibling. And my younger brother and sister grew up in the shadow of that loss in so many ways, that I think we all clung to each other.

And so my mother's almost 90 and just the thought of losing her is just unbearable. But I lost a child and my mother lost a child. And so I know that that love in our family, and that beautiful attachment that we have to each other, because I think a lot of it is healthy and beautiful and not pathological in any way. You can call it enmeshment, but I just call it love. Is rooted in the felt experience of the impermanence of this life. And I think I feel a very similar attachment to my beloved friends and to my stepchildren who are, there's no step. I just remove the step part, especially at the grandchildren level. And we have eight of them

now. There is this passionate attachment that losing loved ones has given me, but I don't see it as a problem at all. I see it as a great blessing. Jesus wept when Lazarus died, and I love that about Jesus.

Mike Petrow: That's so precious. I so appreciate that. And yeah, I know for our listeners, and even seasons of my own life, I have biological family that I'm deeply connected to and I have biological family that I'm estranged from. And I think there are some of us who are like satellites. And it's so inspiring to know that there are ways. I think about, you said something recently to me about Jenny becoming one of your ancestors now. These family members who've transitioned on, these mystics that you translate, these teachers that come into our sphere, do they become like family as well for you?

Mirabai Starr: Oh, I'm so glad you asked that. That's what you were getting at. Yes, yes. So I have this whole spirit team, and I was wonderfully surprised to notice Jenny, my fourteen-year-old daughter, take her place in that circle, a prominent place actually after she died. I was like, what? She's my child, but she's my ancestor. I have since then heard many other parents describe that experience of feeling like their child has become their ancestor, and is now there to guide and support them on their journey. And yes, my spirit team consists of my grandmothers, my daughter, my brother, and Ramdas who died recently, was my lifelong teacher. And Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and Julian of Norwich and so many others.

So there are these two streams that mingle in that circle of ancestors, my genetic lineage and adoptive and also family, and also my multiple spiritual lineages, the Christian mystics and the Jewish mystics and the great teachers of India and Sufi masters and so on. Poets and artists and activists all take their place in my circle of ancestors, and they are my family. I love that you put it that way.

Paul Swanson: I resonate so deeply with that, of the intertwining of families and lineages and ancestors. I've often joked that I asked Jesus in my heart when I was a kid, in my evangelical tradition, but I've invited a lot more folks into my heart as well. One of them is John Prine. How are these folks who have had these normative formative experiences on me, that either never met or that I just met a few years ago, like Hattawitch of Antwerp, who I'm deeply in love with and who now resides in the vastness of my heart? And I think it's such an invitation to look at the expansiveness of those we've had, those physical, tangible, we can put a hand on relationships, to form us whether we lost and how we will lose them someday. And those we never had the chance to be within the physical realm, have this spiritual nourishment that they guide us and they support us in ways that we can't even always articulate, but that it creates a gaze of love that comes out through us, they see through us and reflect back upon us.

Mirabai Starr: That's so beautiful, Paul. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: Well, I love that. And to draw our conversation to a close, one of the things we've been asking everybody, Mirabai, is when folks read a book like *Falling Upward* and they learn about the two halves of life, we're always invited to live in both. We're invited to live the wisdom of the first half of life and the second half of life at the same time. We think of the first half of life as we build containers. And then in the second half of life, some of those containers break, some of those relationships go away, and we learn from that.

But one of the things I hear in this conversation, especially as we're concluding and celebrating being able to create this found family, while talking about necessary suffering, is that joy and sorrow go together. And great love and great suffering are intertwined. And gratitude and grief, I think must necessarily go together. So this is our last question for you, Mirabai. How can we live the reality of both gratitude and grief and sorrow and celebration at the same time in the pursuit of, I don't know, a whole heart in this life? Does that question make sense?

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. And my response is how could we not? Great suffering shatters the container of the heart and that makes the space inside the heart vast. So I think that if we're busy trying to build pretty boxes in the earlier part of our lives, the second half is an invitation to make friends with the shattering and the space that it opens, and the inflow of wonder that comes when we no longer are trying to exert our will on the universe, and bend it to our way of seeing and wanting. But actually coming into direct and intimate beginner's mind, not knowing, fresh. Wow, radical amazement. Abraham, Joshua, Heschel called this holy childlike state that we get to encounter and embrace.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Mirabai. That image of surrendering to the inflow of wonder is something I'm going to be walking around with for the rest of the day.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh, so much love and appreciation as always. It's such a gift. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Mirabai.

Mirabai Starr: It's such a joy to be with you. Your questions are just yummy.

Paul Swanson: Thank you everyone for listening to this episode with Mirabai Starr. It was such a treat to be in conversation with Richard and then with Mirabai. And as we record this contemplative prompt a few days later, Mike sadly can't be here, but I am joined by CAC producer extraordinaire, Corey Wayne. Such a delight to be in conversation with him today. And as Corey and I were talking about what we might consider as the best question to leave everyone with, and ourselves with after this conversation, we reflected on the two previous episodes. Where in episode four, we invited all of us to reflect on the question, what are you grieving over right now and what are you grateful for right now?

And then in episode five, we invited all of us to reflect on how have the wounds in my life opened me up to new wisdom? And as we receive those questions and reflecting upon the relationship between woundedness, grief and gratitude, and how that relates to necessary suffering, something popped into Corey's mind that we thought would be really fruitful to offer to all of you. Corey, what was that that came to mind as we are in this conversation?

Corey Wayne: We were talking about the nature of, or I guess I should say, the difference between physical wounds and emotional wounds. And the fact that when you get physically wounded, you don't have a choice in feeling it. But often when we're emotionally wounded or we're experiencing a form of suffering that is not necessarily physical, we have a tendency to dissociate, and distract ourselves, and find things to do to mask that pain. And I think a lot of what we have been talking about over the last three episodes, and particularly this one,

is the rawness that comes with grief and suffering, emotional suffering. And I was thinking back to the recent cancer scare that I just got out of. Thankfully, it ended up being nothing. But when I was in it, I had no choice of feeling it because of the constant state of shock. And as Kate talked about, there's this feeling that your life got robbed from you.

So you don't have a choice but to go to bed with it every night and to wake up with it every morning. And a great spiritual practice that I had from my teacher, Tara Bracken, dealing with the rawness of that grief and angst, was this practice of RAIN. Which is recognize, allow, investigate, and nurture. Before she teaches the concept of RAIN, she always starts with a parable. And there was an Indian sage that was off in a far land, and he was known to have a magic so powerful that it could relieve the most severe suffering. People would go on a pilgrimage through the wilderness just to reach this guy, only to find him and be greeted with a question. And the question that he would ask them is, what are you unwilling to feel? There's a pause in that question. It's very disarming, but at the same time, it's an acknowledgement that you're willing to accept what is.

Paul Swanson: I so appreciate that question. I so appreciate you sharing what that has meant for you, because there's so many times in our life where I know for myself, where there's doors within me that have been shut or locked, where I'm unwilling to go in and feel the feelings of that experience of suffering. And this chapter, this conversation and this question, all invite us to be bold and take the risk to face the necessary suffering of our life, and to do it with deep compassion. And to recognize the ways in which we are not feeling all of our life. And part of our own wholeness and our own integration is to be willing to engage with those areas of necessary suffering, so that we can embrace and be in solidarity, not only with ourselves, but also those who find themselves in suffering.

Corey Wayne: So I think a question that we would like to leave all of you with this week, as you're reflecting on this episode of necessary suffering is the question, what am I unwilling to feel?

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Barb Lopez: Barb Lopez.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

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