



# EVERYTHING BELONGS

Amnesia and the Big Picture  
with Michael Battle

Paul Swanson: There is an inherent goodness in becoming what you already are. The trouble is that we humans are a forgetful bunch. We fall into a stupor of trying to be someone else, clamoring to be someone we think we should be, forgetting that we are born bearing the image of God in a very particular way. Father Richard honors the particularity of each person by pointing to how its diverse pieces play into wholeness, how the invitation is to be shared participants in divine nature. And the implications of this have a staggering impact on how one orientates to self, others, and the cosmos.

In today's conversation, we are welcomed back into Richard's hermitage by Opie and into a conversation on chapter eight, Amnesia and the Big Picture. In our time together, we talk about practices that help us become conscious of who we are, ideas around heaven and hell, to open ourselves to the full embrace of this reality, and the journey of recognition of the diversity within communion.

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.

Paul Swanson: Richard, thank you so much for inviting us back to your porch, letting us sit on it as we are gathered here to talk about Falling Upward, chapter eight, Amnesia and the Big Picture. I want to begin with this amazing quote that you have in this chapter, where you say, "Life is a matter of becoming fully and consciously who we already are, but it is a self that we largely do not know." Let me just pause there to let that soak in for everyone listening.

But as you hear these words you've written again on this beautiful Albuquerque day, when you think back, what practices do you think help put you into a place where you can become more fully conscious of who you already are? What does that look like? Are there practices? Are there ways of thinking that help that arise?

Richard: No, I don't mean to be clever, but there's ways of not thinking. The word that immediately comes to mind is extended silence. I know that sounds blasé, but it's true. I am picturing myself in one of my hermitages. It's in Arizona. I'm walking down a steep hill. I've been alone for three weeks maybe. And because there's no competition, there's no obsessive pressure to do or be anything, it just falls into place. It's all already done. It's all here. How do I know this? I don't know how I know it, but I know it. It isn't a conclusion come to by logic or reason or argumentation. It's a get rid of all the dross, get rid of all the window dressing, and there you stand. I think it's why so many of the mystics use the word naked. That's how you feel, that you're getting back to what you always were and you just didn't know it.

I know that sounds too clever, but it's true. And I think that's why the desert fathers and mothers emphasized the desert so much. It was a place without distraction that could hold mirrors in front of you. "You're this, you're this, you're that." When I stopped dressing myself up and have no one to impress and no one to disappoint, there it is. I can't prove that to you, but that's what makes the indwelling spirit so believable, that my God, it's there. I didn't learn this from outside. I learned it from inside. And why Teresa of Avila and other mystics will speak of the soul being the dwelling place, the favorite dwelling place of God. It's an

inner knowing that is deeply satisfying so that people are different afterwards, they aren't looking for money or fame or special clothing.

Mike Petrow: Do you know anyone who would do that?

Paul Swanson: Are you saying there's an equanimity that arises?

Richard: That's good. That's a good word, yeah.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting. What I find fascinating about something I hear in a lot of your teaching, this getting away from all the things we try to do to prove our own worthiness. The games that we play to prove who we are to other people, we get away from all that. We get in the quiet, we face these mirrors that we talked about.

Richard: And it has to be an extended time so nothing can snag you anymore with its emotional content, if that makes sense.

Mike Petrow: But does that bring us to, do you think a sense of being loved that wells up ....?

Richard: Well, that's what it comes down to, that this core self is not just loved. It is love.

Mike Petrow: Oh wow.

Richard: It's good. It's satisfied. Listen to all these recorded now many times over, these near-death experiences. They're saying it again and again, for 30 seconds, they knew they were love and loved. Both are true, but capable of loving. And then when you begin to draw from that source, that's what we mean by being sealed in the Holy Spirit to use new Testament language. You're sealed with something that's been there, but now you've localized it in place. "Okay, I'm going to hold onto you, because you've got the truth. The only truth I need." And yet all I can do is tell people, but I can't prove it to people. They have to know it for themselves. Every person does. I know this is sounding like such a cliché, but it's just true.

Go ahead.

Mike Petrow: No, it's not a cliché at all. Actually, the notion of coming to that place of realizing that I'm love and I am love, that sounds like the greatest thing in the world. It sounds like heaven to me. And I like that, because one of the things I like about this chapter is that you talk about heaven and hell, and you talk about them as realities that we face in this life right now. I feel like so many of us grew up with Christianity as an evacuation plan, and the hope for heaven after life and the terrifying fear of hell, and all this was about was getting somewhere better after. And then what's wild is a lot of us grow beyond that and we throw those images away altogether.

Richard: That's the trouble.

Mike Petrow: But you give them back to us in this chapter.

Richard: Because they're describing, and I hope I say that, I don't know what I said in that book. But heaven and hell are now, it's easy to see people who are in hell. They just create controversy and chaos and dissatisfaction wherever they go. Jesus isn't talking about later, and what gives

that away is his healing ministry. He doesn't heal people and say, "Okay, now this is proof that you're going to go to heaven. No, I'm healing you right now for now. I'm giving you a moment of radical unity with me, which is radical unity with God."

We can't emphasize enough what the constant healing ministry of Jesus implied. At an implied present tense, this world suffering, God cares about it.

Mike Petrow: In an embodied way, that's so helpful.

Richard: In an embodied way, yeah. And we got lost in the world of the miraculous trying to prove, "Oh, it's a miracle." Well, it is a miracle, but not the way you think it. It's not a bodily reformation. If it is, it's to show that the soul has been rearranged.

Mike Petrow: I so appreciate this, because the notion of experiencing yourself as loved and as love is being in heaven. And the funny thing is the way that most people are taught hell, the idea that God would be angry and God would want to punish us, that idea itself is hell. We are in hell if we believe in that idea.

Richard: Very good, that's right.

Mike Petrow: Even if we're trying to find a way to be rescued, what a terrible thing to have to believe.

Richard: Because you're henceforth in an unsafe universe. If God is a punishing God, you're not free. You're constantly under observation. And it's a critical eye, he speaks of the eye of God looking on the sparrow and protecting it. This is not a curse of an eye, it's a blessing of an eye. I don't know why we don't get that. The whole frame is what's off. You got to get the frame right, what's God up to, and once you get that, then you'll interpret the smaller pieces more correctly.

In my new book, I wrote two pages yesterday and just put them in columns. Religion as a cult of innocence, which is what we've all been raised at, where we try to prove we are not sinners. Try to prove that you're essentially insecure constantly, and religion as a community of solidarity, with pain, with suffering. It really works. Jesus is just inviting us into a trust and a sympathy for human suffering. And that world of solidarity, like right now, people are trying to weigh, "Well, who's causing more suffering? The Israelis or the Palestinians? Who's suffering is merited?"

Just stop it. Remember when I said, "Whenever you count, you're in trouble." Israeli people are suffering and Palestinian people are suffering, and God is wherever the suffering is. And our Christian language for that is to look for the crucified. And you see crucifixion in Israeli families and you see crucifixion in Palestinian families. Now stop the argument. Go where the suffering is. You see that leaves you without a righteous stance, without a righteous opinion. You've just, "Oh, dang it." Whatever side you've chosen is only half of the truth, because once you start weighing who's suffering is worse, who has deserved suffering, you're in trouble.

Paul Swanson: And this goes to, I think about Jesus saying, "When I was hungry and you fed me, when I was in prison and you visited me." Jesus is saying that he's there, so Christ

is present in the suffering in those who are being marginalized. So wherever there is suffering, Christ is. So then it just destroys the either or.

Richard: There you go.

Paul Swanson: And this is why Francis is such a model.

Richard: There you go, that's the meaning of the cross, how we're saved by the cross. Just go to the cross. The Focolare, have you ever heard of them? They were a lay religious community, very influential in Italy, founded by a wonderful woman named Chiara Lubich. You ever heard of her?

Paul Swanson: No.

Richard: No, I guess it's a Catholic thing. But this woman was a mystic, just died a few years ago. And she called them, "The moments of Jesus forsaken." Now that became, "Where is Jesus forsaken right now?" That's where you go. Just look around you, where is Jesus forsaken? Go there. The Saints always come up with these clever phrases that force you into recognition. And so the division is not now between Catholics and Protestants, Northern Italy or Southern Italy, or all the usual divisions Italians might have. Just where is Jesus? Has Jesus been forsaken? That's where you must live. She was a natural Franciscan.

Mike Petrow: Reminds me, there's a very powerful moment in the book, *Night*, by Elie Wiesel.

Richard: Oh, tell me.

Mike Petrow: So they are prisoners and they're lined up in a concentration camp, and they're forced to watch an execution. And so there are other prisoners who are hung and they're dying there on the gallows, and one prisoner whispers, "Where is God? In the midst of this, where is God?" And as I remember, Elie Wiesel fields this answer that says, "There is God on the gallows." And what's so powerful about that is that it has a double meaning, because one meaning could be that in the midst of so much suffering, God is dead. God is not powerful because suffering exists. But the other meaning is there is God. God is on the gallows with the people who are suffering, because the ultimate reality of existence is divine love's fidelity and presence in the midst of our suffering.

Richard: See, and Elie Wiesel was a Jew. He understood the cross better than most Christians do in that occasion. There is God right there, brilliant. It was already given to the Jewish people in second Isaiah, what we call the four servant songs. That the one who would redeem would be a suffering one, and he would reveal the truth, that God is hidden in suffering.

Mike Petrow: And I love, Paul, you and I had talked about this previously, where when we think about heaven and hell, and we think about salvation not as an escape from suffering but we think about it in the way that Eastern Orthodox do. You pointed this out, is theosis, our becoming Christ-like. If Christ goes into suffering, then part of our salvation, right Richard, is our embracing the suffering of others, ourselves. Hell

doesn't become a place we avoid, it becomes a place we invade in solidarity and with help for others.

Richard: The little hells on this earth that we create. Yeah, very good. Thank you. You understand. Once you get it, you can't unget it. It's so dang simple. And we keep weighing and measuring. That's all I hear on TV, is who's suffering worse? The Palestinians or the Jews. They're both suffering. They're both Jesus forsaken, if you want to use that phrase.

Paul Swanson: There's another quote that comes to mind as a way to try to weave all these things together. When you write, "Life moves first towards diversity, and then toward union of that very diversity at ever higher levels." If we start with who we already are but don't really know, and we see ourselves on this path of theosis or divinization in a bigger picture, it drops any perfection plan about getting the keys into heaven for oneself. And you also say in the book, "We start elitist and end up egalitarian." Can you talk to us about how this journey of recognition brings us to new understandings of our personal life, corporate life, and also the afterlife? How are these all nested eggs one another? And I think about that just in reference to the title itself of the chapter, Amnesia and the Big Picture. There's a remembering, a recollecting that needs to happen to be able to see that bigger picture. How do you see the nested of the person, the corporate, and the afterlife?

Richard: Universal truths don't tend to convict. It has to be specific, concrete, one bleeding woman or person. That's what convicts and changes. Now, it's the same on the positive side. You can say, "Oh, God is love." That doesn't tend to convert people. They have to have one moment where they know they're being held, where they know they're being chosen, where they know they're being protected. Now, that's why you start elitist. "Oh wow, I spent my whole youth that way. I was dicky boy, I was my mother's little dicky boy or my daddy's little dicky boy. And I just expected people to love me."

You say, "him?" Because that's all I'd ever got was my parents' delight. So that makes you very elitist. Now, what happens in the middle journey is you recognize, "Oh, Richard, don't waste time just thinking this is you. This is God's stance toward reality." The Jewish people made the same mistake when they thought they were the chosen people. They are chosen so they know what chosenness feels like, and therefore who God is. And who God is is who God is, for the Palestinians too, and for the Protestants too, and for the whoever you've decided God doesn't choose. God is choosing. So it starts elitist, that's the only thing that converts you.

Universals don't tend to convert you. I think that's why so many liberals aren't fully converted. They have great universal theories, but they never let it come home to a concrete commitment. And that's a generalization, but it tends to be true in my experience. And when you can move from the individual personal to, "My God, this is the shape of the universe," that's when everything belongs.

Okay, and I belong and everybody else belongs. Stop weighing and calculating and judging and discerning who's worthy and who's unworthy. Worthy, God does not love you because you're good, you're good because God loves you. And God's love makes everything a child of God, everything came forth from the same God. This is supposed to be the gift of monotheism. If there's one God, and this God is love itself, problem solved. There's one

universe, uni versus, turning around one thing. We should have got there real quickly, but we didn't.

Mike Petrow: This is why you like the Pope's mantra.

Richard: Which one?

Mike Petrow: What is it, "todos"?

Richard: "Todos," he says, yes. Or, "Tuti Tuti" in Italian. He's trying to get the crowds to chant this.

Mike Petrow: And that means all?

Richard: Yes, or everybody.

Mike Petrow: Everybody.

Richard: Everybody, everybody. They start arguing with him about, "Well, what about these people?" It's usually the gays. "What about the gays?" And they'll say, "Todos." What is it about "todos" you don't understand? You don't say that, I wish you would.

Mike Petrow: Everyone is welcome, god loves everyone.

Richard: Once it's everyone, just stop your argumentation.

Mike Petrow: It's so funny, because you mentioned monotheism as being included. And it's so funny, because to this day even still, I hear monotheism and I think, "No, it's my God, not your God." But that completely defeats the purpose.

Richard: Very good, completely defeats the purpose. We should have been the first one to make the home run. It was all... But here it ends up, and that's why Jesus is so hard on the Pharisees. I just wrote yesterday, "In Matthew 23, Jesus uses the word hypocrites seven times directly and four times indirectly." It's the one thing that just pisses him off. People pretending to be something they're not. And the real word means actors. "You actors, you don't need to act, you already are."

Paul Swanson: And there it comes in the chapter title again, Amnesia and the Big Picture of being what you are.

Richard: How did I use the word amnesia?

Mike Petrow: It was the title, you were talking about there's a forgetfulness.

Richard: It's 20 years since I wrote that book. You got to read it back to me. What is it I said by amnesia?

Paul Swanson: Well, I have my book right here, but if I can go from memory, it's the thought that we forget about who we actually are in God.

Richard: Yes, that's it.

Paul Swanson: And it is one of those things that we constantly need reminders of. My wife and I have started using this with our kids where when they've done something and we're upset with them, and it's very easy for them to take that on. So we are now trying to say, "You're a good kid having a hard time." Something that reminds them first of their inherent goodness.

Richard: Essential goodness.

Paul Swanson: And so that's never questioned, then we can move on from there.

Richard: That's brilliant. Good for you.

Mike Petrow: And I love this idea of the concrete and the personal, and bringing it back. I think about how Richard used to hate Protestants until he met you and I.

Richard: Until I met the two of you.

Mike Petrow: And then we helped him realize...

Paul Swanson: That's right.

Richard: How good they can be. Putting Catholics to shame, thank you.

Paul Swanson: We're not all stuck in purgatory. Some of us are going to heaven with you Catholics.

Mike Petrow: That's right.

Richard: Good for you, good for you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard.

Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Today we're joined by the Very Reverend Dr. Michael Battle, who was ordained a priest by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1993. Michael's clergy experience in addition to his academic work makes him an internationally sought after speaker, teacher, writer, and spiritual leader. He has published 11 books, including his latest, Desmond Tutu, A Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor. His PeaceBattle Institute works on subjects of diversity, spirituality, prayer, race, and reconciliation. Michael and his wife Raquel were married by Archbishop Tutu, and are parents to two daughters, Sage and Bliss, and a son, Zion.

Mike Petrow: Michael, it is so great to get to hang out with you a little bit more. Thank you for joining us today to talk about Father Richard Rohr's book, Falling Upward, how we can live these teachings forward, and how we get to experience that in your life and your work. As a place to just jump in, for those who were about to become familiar with your work but perhaps are not yet familiar with your work, you wear a lot of hats. Parent, partner, priest, peacemaker, academic, author, answerer of the ongoing call. Is there a call to a certain type of wandering or working in this season of your life that's really, really giving you energy and purpose?

Michael Battle: Yeah, first, thanks for having me here. This is an honor. I think these times are such that we



need those folks who know that the water is wet, the saying is that a fish doesn't know it's wet. And David Foster Wallace had a powerful clip when he was giving the commencement speech at Kenyon College, that those of us, especially in the western world, our default setting is me. And as long as we stay in that default setting, we're heading over a cliff. And so much of my work, both vocationally and well as just being a human being is trying to get us to see we are more than the sum of our parts. We are more than an aggregate of individuals or more than a crowd, that if we believe in the God revealed in Jesus that we were even made in the image of God, that image is community. So that kind of reframing and that kind of proclaiming is still what brings me energy.

Mike Petrow: That's so good. I am so excited to get into this conversation with you. And right off the bat, the chapter that we've been exploring in Richard's book, a lot of it is about letting go of our illusions and remembering what really matters. And there's a sentence, we've been hanging out before this episode, and the whole time we've been talking, I've been thinking about this sentence in the chapter where Richard says, "Only the true self knows that heaven is now and that its loss is hell also now. The false self makes religion into the old evacuation plan for the next world."

I cannot help but think about it seems that so much of your work is about confronting the reality of making heaven real on earth and recognizing where hell is real on earth. Does that resonate at all?

Michael Battle: Yeah, heaven is the presence of God, and we have learned that you can't keep God out of nowhere. So the false notions of our dichotomies of heaven and hell are usually used as a carrot and stick to keep us in hell basically. But the more we learn from Jesus and Jesus's simplicity to transform us, the more we are available to this powerful way of seeing that God is with us. So Emmanuel and heaven are the same word, that God is with us, we are able to be the most of who we are. And when we are not with God because of the freedom that we have to do that, then we become solitary, individualistic. We live in a default setting of me, and that's hell. That's a butterfly effect towards hell, at least.

Mike Petrow: That's absolutely brilliant, and thank you. And I want to sit with that for a second, the idea that the false dichotomy of heaven and hell puts us in hell, and that our sense of isolation and separateness puts us there as well. I'm going to think about that for a long time, thank you.

Paul Swanson: I love that you brought up that David Foster Wallace speech, This is Water. It's something I revisit probably annually because of the impact of just getting to that space of that interconnectedness. And speaking of interconnectedness, I know that you were very close with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and I was lucky enough to take along with Father Richard to South Africa, what would that be, 15 years ago? And we had the chance to hang out with Archbishop Tutu, and we discovered last night over dinner when we were breaking bread that one of the guys that we got to know is a dear friend of yours. But that experience of meeting Archbishop Tutu was a real marker for me, because he embodied so many saintly qualities and that we're also extraordinarily human.

So when I read about the time that you spent with Archbishop Tutu and you wrote this amazing spiritual autobiography on him, the closeness of that relationship, my imagination

just soars on what the personal impact might've been for you. So I'm curious, how did the exploration of Desmond Tutu spirituality impact your own sense of your own divinization, your own theosis, and add texture from the experience you had with him? Does that make sense?

Michael Battle: Yeah, I really do feel like I was imprinting on him like a baby duck imprints on the mother duck to know how to be a duck. My life with Tutu was a once-in-a-lifetime gift, and I still compare it to almost being a biblical writer trying to record the reality of a saint among us. The difficulty of doing all of that, of course, is in how are we able to be a voice in the wilderness and to continue being a voice in the wilderness? And so in some ways, currently right now, that effect of being with Tutu has changed me to what can I do to help his witness's example be known?

And there are forces at work that do not want a life like Tutu's to be known. There are forces at work to pigeonhole him, to typecast him as someone that's not very important. In fact, there was a time when major Christian leaders like Jerry Falwell called Tutu a phony, and then there were times near the end of Archbishop Tutu's life that even the ANC, which is the black major political party currently in power, they were so fed up with Tutu being a thorn in their side around certain issues. So he was getting it at both sides that his legacy was being lessened on both sides, and it's very difficult to live in that kind of a crucible.

We all want affirmation, but yet he did that without needing to try to buoy his legacy. He spoke truth to power. So those things have affected me in such a way that this has really been, that I see it will be a life, a work that will be done the rest of my life.

Paul Swanson: And I feel like you lean into that space. You told a story earlier about post-apartheid, how Mandela really wanted a truth commission. And the clerk, the Afrikaner leader, really wanted a reconciliation commission. And Tutu leaned into the and of that, that both and, to not be separated or divided into just truth or reconciliation, but the both and of that. And that seems like part of the way that you're picking up that legacy and also living that forward too. Can you speak to how you lean into the both and of the peace work that you do with that?

Michael Battle: Yeah, I think that's a great example, Mandela and de Klerk. And Tutu basically was the only one who could pull it off. And he's the only one who could have pulled it off, because to do that crucible work means that you have to have the character to withstand living in those tensions. You have to have developed in such a way that you can live in that brackish water. That you are mature enough, that you can survive in all of these different environments. And so to hold together truth and reconciliation, and to have such a unique experiment by a nation state to try to solve issues not based on civil war and violence, but based on telling each other's stories.

Social workers teach community organizing by getting people to tell their stories, and before you know it, there's a common story. And so Tutu's genius through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to get a nation state to tell their stories, even to the point of the depth of a story of confessing wrongs done in public. Again, those who want retributive justice saw Tutu as a failure. They saw him as someone who was just trying to appease those in power. But for Tutu, he always saw himself in restorative justice, creating an environment

in which both those who are our enemies and ourselves, creating an environment in which we can move forward and not backward. And to me, that was the power of what Tutu gave.

I also hope that when we think about Tutu, now that he has passed, we are not trying to make him this kind of statue that, here's a life that only happens once in a millennia or whatever, but to try to understand how he was a part of the solution and that we all can be a part of the solution. But most of all for us as Christians, because much of the world sees the church like it's a Monty Python sketch, the church is just a bunch of silly people. But here was someone like Tutu who represented the church in such a profound way that maybe people just didn't have a frame of reference to see the profundity that he provided.

Mike Petrow: That's so profound. When I think about that, when I think about the tensions that he was able to hold and stand in the middle of, I have to say first of all that I love your book, *The Spiritual Biography of Desmond Tutu*. And you got me real early in the preface when you clarified how much time he would spend daily in silence. It blew my mind. The dichotomies that we still fall into, I tend to think of whether someone's a little bit more of a contemplative or a little bit more of an activist, even working here at the Center for Action and Contemplation. And in your book you say, "All told, each day would bring about seven hours in silence," which, God, which blows my mind. Because here's someone who literally changed the world, and found, or maybe made time for seven hours of silence.

And then you quote a longtime friend of his who used to travel with him, and said that when they would go places, international organizations tried to pressure Tutu to do things morning, noon, and night. And he would say to them, "What kind of Tutu do you want and why do you invite him here? If you want him for his communication skills, ebullient personality and that kind of thing in which he thrives in big groups, if you want that Tutu, you need to respect his need for chunks of silence."

And then you write, "For Tutu, it was like two sides of a coin. If you want the spirituality, communication, and ebullience, you need the other side, silence, contemplation, and stillness with God." So if we don't think of him as a once in a millennia lightning strike of a human, but think of his life as an invitation, first of all, it blows my mind. You spent time with him in his home. I have to ask about the reality of that rhythm. And then with that, how's that an invitation for us who live such busy lives to think differently about making a difference?

Michael Battle: Yeah, thanks Mike. I think the claim of that whole book is that Tutu is a saint, and those practices to me exemplify his saintliness, that he's so dedicated to being made available to God. And I think that's what those seven hours were meant for for him. But as I said earlier in some of our other times together here, it was a pretty easy choice for someone like Tutu to spend seven hours with God. Because without God, Tutu said he would not be able to be who he was, to do what he did, and to have lasted as long as he did. He was actually very surprised that he lived to be as old as he did. At least he was surprised to have a so-called normal death, a natural death. That was, if you think about it, for all of us who are still living, just think about that existentially. That you are living, knowing in fact that your life will end violently, not in a natural way.

And to, just like Martin Luther King sitting at the coffee table, coming to grips with, he's

not going to live long, he's not going to have a natural death. And Tutu was very aware of those narratives like King, very much aware of major spiritual leaders going against people in power, Gandhi and others. He was very much aware of that, and he did not think he was going to have a natural death. I think your last part, last part of your question, how can we make sure that this is not some life that's so far from our own life?

And I think if truth is told, all of us know that our purpose in life is to be authentic. And the more authentic we can live a life, the more challenging it can be. Because if we are authentic, we become like the character in Saturday Night Live. This is an old character, so I'm dating myself, Debbie Downer. I don't know if you were all young enough for Debbie Downer. But sometimes to be authentic, you are not the life of the party. Sometimes to be authentic, you've got to call out what is wrong. You have to say, "That's a racist statement." Or, "That's a statement that's against being human." Or, "Let's stop these ridiculous debates over climate change."

So to be authentic, we enter that space of someone like Tutu, who knew that to be authentic in certain spaces meant a certain death. And for us normal folks, it may not be a physical death, but it might be the death of a dysfunctional relationship. It might be the reality of some people not liking us. And I'm not trying to say go out and ruin your friendships and your relationships. I'm just saying that to be someone who is trying their best to be authentic, trying to sync our own will with God's, we may have to enter those very contentious spaces in our lives and in our communities.

Mike Petrow: So Richard has this thing he says where when he sits in contemplation, he likes to sit until he gets to a point of yes. And this idea of saying yes to reality, we talk about this all the time, the acceptance of reality is not the approval of reality. But the amount of courage that it takes to say yes to an authentic life that is not in denial about the challenges of reality around us. And you've shared with us, so you screened calls that were death threats. You played de facto bodyguard in a sense, the courage that that models to just show up and keep living. And you said there was no official bodyguard.

Michael Battle: And that kind of faith to live such a life, not to hire security, but to trust God. That's what I mean by the developmental stage that led to that kind of leadership. At that crux, that crucial moment in the history of South Africa, it's not just something that happens capriciously or whimsically. This was a formed life. And when we pray, when we have spiritual disciplines, when we are in community intentionally, we are being formed for future moments. It's similar to Thomas Aquinas when he talked about luck, he said, "There was really no luck."

What happens, for example, with a football player, one of my favorite football players going through a hard time right now, Russell Wilson, when he's in the fourth quarter and he's throwing a touchdown, and seconds are running off the clock, that's not luck. It's the developmental stage that the work that he's put in, the development of being able to read the defense, the ability to be able to not be anxious, that's formation. And I think that's what the Christian life needs. We need to live in that development, that formation that God has for us. And that's why we need to be in community. We can't be in that default setting of me.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I think about that with spiritual integrity, there's a necessary secrecy component to it.

I don't mean hiding from the world, but the work that's done when no one's watching, the practices that are done in community when there's no camera on. But what is it, take Russell Wilson for example. All those drills, all that strength training, all that endurance training. And that's why a lot of those things translate to the spiritual life, because of the things that we do to prepare ourselves. To have that spiritual integrity, so when we're not the life of the party, knowing we're going to draw some folks towards us by that integrity. And it's also going to be a natural repellent in a way.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, and the early word for spiritual discipline leading the spiritual formation is [foreign language 00:48:25], which is training and athletics. That's really brilliant. I appreciate that, Michael, you're really inviting, I think us into rethinking what it is, or thinking more deeply about what it is to live a life of intention and formation. Also, I have to say earlier in conversation, you compared Bishop Desmond Tutu to Batman, which is maybe my favorite cross-cultural reference of all time, but that's also part of the formation. Would you share just with our audience a second about that?

Michael Battle: Yeah, similar to Russell Wilson, folks like Tutu, he was trained, he was disciplined by monks, and more particularly the community of the resurrection. And there was one particular monk named Trevor Huddleston, who took a special interest in a young child, Desmond Tutu. And from that very encounter by that monk, he was trained. Went over to England to be in formation with the community of the resurrection and those monastic communities. From that childhood experience, Tutu never lost touch with the monastic communities. Which also lends itself to that developmental stage of being that Cistercian person who can pray seven hours.

But I think what's key in all of this conversation that should be relevant to all of us, not just for a Batman in our spiritual life or a superhero, but akin to any ordinary life, is that if we're not in those developmental stages, when those moments come, that can cause a butterfly effect that could provide a change for those who are not even born. If we are not ready to say the right word at the right time, if we're not ready to volunteer, for example, with a child in a low-income school, and if we don't have that kind of a character to get outside of our consumerist identity, you just don't know.

Those who are volunteering in schools or hospitals, whatever, that one individual that you, because of your developmental stage, your spirituality, your worldview of God, you are there with that person. Not by accident, but because you are in sync with God's will. But if you don't have that developmental stage, we leave this world to a wild west. We leave it to the whimsical nature of those in power. So the developmental stage is important, but I'm afraid in our western Christianity, there are forces at work in terms of how we understand faith, how we understand grace, how we understand development, maturity, the work of the Christian life.

I'm afraid in many of our debates, our binary debates of faith and work, we just throw the baby out with the bathwater. And we don't have any measurements of our development, our maturity in the Christian life. Everything is grace. Or we have this Mother Teresa syndrome, that we are not developing in these very mature ways because I'm not Mother Teresa, I have a nine to five job or whatever. So it's important for us to understand the butterfly effects of our developmental life in God. It does matter, if that makes any sense.

Mike Petrow: It does. And I'm thinking about, let me see if I can get this to make sense. So peacemaking is a huge theme throughout your work, in the world and in your writing. And we think about peacemaking right now in the hotbed of wars, disputes, political divides, systems of violence, it seems like there's never been a more crucial time to be doing this type of work. And we tend to think of it in collective terms, which of course it has to be and is necessary.

I'm thinking about, one of my favorite Russian mystics says, "Cultivate inner peace and thousands around you will be safe. Cultivate inner peace and the world around you will transform." And I've heard some people push back on that as a spiritual bypassing, "Well, the world's on fire, now's not a good time to go off on a mountain top and seek your own peace and your own calm." But I wonder if that's not what that quote is saying. And it's a paradigmatic shift about recognizing that our healing is interconnected with the healing of the world. Our peacemaking internally contributes to the peacemaking of the world, which suddenly made a lot more sense when I encountered your entire body of work. And who you are in the world and how you present Bishop Tutu in the world, and this concept of Ubuntu, which just continually blows my mind.

Would you share with us a bit about that, and how it takes individual and collective and brings them together?

Michael Battle: So for our western minds and hearts and souls, we have an axiom or a parva, "I think therefore I am." And it goes back to David Foster Wallace, that the default mode is an individual consciousness. So we've all in the Western world, we've all pretty much, we drank the Kool-Aid that reality is really about me. And major intellects, major figures like René Descartes from the European Enlightenment really continued to give us that Kool-Aid in terms of thinking about God, for example. So we've developed this kind of personal religion, personal salvation, and all that really matters existentially is me.

Ubuntu, which counters this African worldview, which counters a Westernized worldview has a different proverb. That proverb is, "I am because we are, and because we are, I am." It's not, "I think therefore I am," it's, "I am, I exist because we exist." So Ubuntu is this beautiful African way of understanding what it means to be human literally from the Bantu languages, which is the Sub-Saharan African languages. Ubuntu is the word for human. But as you can see, this African anthropological worldview carries a much heavier, profound meaning of what it means to be human.

So theologically, I've done work to try to connect that African anthropology to a theological anthropology, and not only to a theological anthropology, but to the life of God. Because God's life as a Christian we believe is Ubuntu. We believe that God is three persons in one nature. And the reason we don't believe in three gods is because in each of the persons are the other two persons. So in each of the persons of God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, are the other two persons. In God, the Father is the Son and the Spirit, and God the Son is the Father and the Spirit. And God the Spirit is the Father and the Son. Their persons are so interdependent, inextricably linked together that that creates one substance, one nature of God.

So theologically, Ubuntu helps us to have a worldview of God that counters the default settings of a westernized Christianity. So Ubuntu's catching on, it used to be known because

it was a name for a computer software company. But more and more it's becoming a way of trying to think through some solutions that can help us out of the ruts that we are finding ourselves as nation states and as communities and individuals.

Paul Swanson: It seems so much that Desmond Tutu embodied the mysticism of Ubuntu, and what does it look like with flesh on and to lead in that way. And I love the way that you added the theology of the Trinity around that, because it also shows the practical nature of how we reflect the image of God, we carry that. And how an individual person does not make sense because it's the connection to others, it's that interdependence that allows us to live out the fullness of what it means to be created in the image and likeness.

Michael Battle: Yeah, I just want to also say thanks, Paul for that, because usually when I'm teaching all this in a classroom setting or speaking, the pushback is that I'm a communist or I'm lessening the uniqueness of being an individual. But actually, if you really think about it, the concept of Ubuntu is enhancing the concept of uniqueness. Meaning that you cannot know that you are beautiful unless there is a gaze that you reciprocate with another who recognizes your beauty. You can't be a standup comedian if there is no one who is laughing at your jokes. You can't be a major musician unless you feel that vibe of reciprocity for the gift that you have.

So actually the concept of Ubuntu, this African worldview is not lessening the individual, it's accentuating who we are as unique persons. It puts on the table the difference between being an individual and being a person. And that's what's so powerful about Ubuntu, and that's a lesson so important for us in the western world.

Mike Petrow: So it feels very profoundly Christian too. And I don't mean in the sense of Christianizing it, but I can't help but think of, okay, so starting here, this chapter is amnesia. So it's about things that we've been brainwashed to forget. And it sounds like this interconnected nature of reality is one of those things we've been brainwashed to forget. And I think about biblical imagery. One of my favorite dichotomies is in the Hebrew Bible, there's this story of the Tower of Babel, where people suddenly by an act of God are all speaking different languages and they can't understand each other. And then there's this story in the Christian scriptures of Pentecost, whereby a miraculous move of the Holy Spirit, people from different cultures and different places continue to speak different languages, but are able to communicate. And what I love about that story is it's not an erasure of distinction, it's a communication that leaves people in their unique languages and cultures and experiences and personhoods, but still suddenly by the work of God, they are interconnected.

I don't know if that makes any sense at all, but that's just the free association of where my mind is going. But I wonder about connecting it to Falling Upward, this notion that is this something that we inherently know in some degree and have been trained to forget by western culture? What do the two of you think?

Michael Battle: Yeah, I think what Father Richard has given us in Falling Upward is this way of seeing patterns that, for example, the pattern in Christian mysticism is purgation, illumination, and union. And I see a similar pattern for what Father Richard is giving in this book, that we can't escape this obsession with self unless there is a movement, a cathartic movement, that there is much more than a self, much more than a especially false self, much more than an appetite to only develop myself. And so this catharsis occurs to help us help the scales fall

from our eyes to see more than just what's for me.

And then once we move in that direction, the falling upward is that paradox that we have to fall in some sense, we have to be cathartic in some sense, purged in some sense to mature. And mature is not really the right word, but it's to be transformed, to be more than ourselves. And Ubuntu is the same way. Ubuntu is trying to say, "We are much more than the sum of our parts. We're much more than individuals without lessening the uniqueness of our personhood."

And what Father Richard gives us is a roadmap to see where we are in our developmental stage. And that can be kind of scary. Or we may not have eyes to see, or we may not want to see. But I think the genius of that book is helping us to see where we are developmentally in our spiritual life.

Paul Swanson: I'm thinking about this amnesia and everything that you've just shared, and the way that it's personal and also collective. It is very easy, I think about the US during the years of Apartheid to look at South Africa and say, "That's terrible, Apartheid's awful." And then with having the amnesia of not looking at the history of the United States, not looking at the enslavement of black people, not looking at Jim Crow, not looking at continued systems of white supremacy, and this is part of what I see as what *Falling Upward's* inviting us to do if we take it and live it forward from beyond just the personal, which is very, very important. But the collective as well, what have we forgotten that needs to be re-remembered so that things are possible in all cultures around truth and reconciliation committees, and is there that possibility for healing is there?

And from my sense, I see so much of your work as healing that amnesia, and what you're inviting people to look at as an author, the experiences you're inviting people into through the trips that you lead. Do you feel like you're a healer of amnesia to see the bigger reality of God and all of the world through this Ubuntu lens of interdependence?

Michael Battle: Yeah, I would say so. In terms of that way of understanding amnesia, probably the motif is reminding people that we are made in the image of God, even reminding our enemies. And as you learn in criminology and that those who commit crimes have to first forget that this is a person. And in not forgetting that this is a person, they feel like they have the permission to treat that person as an object of violence or to kill that person. And so when Tutu, for example, uses that motif over and over again, "We are made in the image of God," he's trying to stop that slow creep and sometimes not even slow creep, just right out war that, "You cannot kill me, and what you were trying to do with the system of objectifying me or not seeing me as a person."

And keep in mind for Tutu, he wasn't just dealing with a secular society, he was dealing with Christians. South Africa was a Christian nation. Apartheid, which was that unjust system was a word from Afrikaans, the same word as to be holy. So apartheid means to be set apart. So there was this process of trying to create a reality that the only human beings were white, of power, and of prestige. Keep in mind, Tutu did not counter that with another violent developmental stage against white people. Instead, he sought to understand that developmental stage that people in power were trying to put others in.



So in other words, Tutu understood that the Afrikaner was also oppressed, that he understood the history that in the early 20th century, the British placed Afrikaners in concentration camps. And as we know in social science, those who commit atrocious violence oftentimes have been victims of violence themselves. And so the deep listening, the, as Richard says in *Falling Upward*, the deep stare at reality, that contemplative way of seeing tragedy gave Tutu the wisdom not to make matters worse, not to throw gas on the fire, but to try to put out the fire and grow a garden. That was what was the genius of Tutu. He didn't fight fire with fire. He didn't practice retributive justice. He was trying to get us to remember which is the counter force to amnesia who we all really are and should be.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I'm just sitting with that, that restorative justice as the response, and the power of that. And there's this quote that connects for me with how Desmond Tutu approached my understanding of how he came to the lens of a rainbow nation. Where Father Richard says in this chapter, "Life moves first toward diversity and then toward union of that very diversity at ever higher levels." I think part of the genius of Tutu using the term like rainbow nation for the multiplicity of colors under one connecting point, it's this unity of diversity and an emblem of goodness.

I just can't get over just the genius of how Tutu always was able to find these simple metaphors, which are actually very complex in the depth that they draw from. I would love to hear any of your thoughts around the complexity of something of restorative justice as this healer of amnesia. How does that connect for you?

Michael Battle: Yeah, the whole power of restorative justice was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and then the power of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was for people to tell their stories, most of which were never heard. Because many of these people telling their stories were not even considered people. So the genius of getting a nation state to get the individuals who were once invisible to tell their stories brought light to the darkness. It brought this healing force to a festering wound, something Tutu loved to say. And I think if we are able to understand the power of telling stories, it helps us to I think solve most of the problems in our individual lives and our families and our communities, our nation states in the world. If we can get each person to have the safety to tell their story, it will have this crescendo exponential effect. Before we know it, we can have a common story.

So the beauty that Tutu brought with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was how he understood the practices not to respond with violence, but to respond with truth-telling, the creation of a space in which truth could be heard and in which a space in which the truth-teller is not killed, and also to produce a non-anxious presence as a leader. So Tutu's non-anxious presence was his humor, which was a tool by the way, his humor disarmed folks who were ready to fight. And it's also another practice of narrative. If you can get those on disparate sides to laugh, that's demonstrating there is the commonality.

So on many different levels, this practice of telling a story is what has been the main methodological way that Tutu helped South Africa to practice restorative justice.

Paul Swanson: That's so beautiful.

Mike Petrow: I love that. And I don't want to drive us into the realm of the abstract, but if anything,

the more practical. It's so interesting, in reviewing our conversation and the conversations we've had even before this conversation, and getting beyond the binary of action and contemplation and realizing that they're intertwined, the one leads to the other and vis-a-vis, I wonder if one of the things that lives between the two is the power of story. I've so enjoyed our conversations, because you've referenced personal stories of your own experiences with Bishop Tutu. You've cited cultural stories, everything from Batman to Narnia to Lord of the Rings to Hunger Games.

You've talked about the overwhelming contemplative practice that it is to simply sit down and read, you said, and look at ink on a page and let our mind magically transform that into places and concepts. I would love to hear literally anything you would like to share about the power of story.

Michael Battle: Look how Jesus taught, story was the key. And story also resonates with diversity. If you get up and just start talking about quarks and quantum physics and you give a lecture on the significance of those, you'll have lost the general public. But if you tell a story of Oppenheimer and you get into the nitty gritty of his unfaithfulness and his marriage and his dark nights of his soul, and his regret of what he created on a quantum level, you have people transfixed. You're winning Oscars and all kinds of things. So the way we communicate is really through story. As my mentor, Stanley Hauerwas, one of the greatest theologians taught that we all need the Christian story to imprint upon in order to know how to be a Christian. We need to be in a community in which we constantly hear the Christian story so that we can be encouraged through difficult times.

So the whole practice of telling stories, as you all know, makes billions of dollars, look at Hollywood. And it's something that unites us. So I just encourage us as we especially practice the institutional church, not to be afraid of creative ways of communication in our major liturgies and communication with the way we teach young people and older people. Jerome Berryman's Godly Play, for example, is a wonderful example of the use of story, but the minute we get up and we try to be so didactic and linear in the way that we teach or preach, is the minute we lose people and we actually lose community in that kind of a way.

Paul Swanson: I think about how, maybe we've talked about this before on the podcast, but we have no record of Jesus writing but in the dirt, but we have lots of stories that he shared. And how impactful that is that story was his primary teaching tool. And since you've invoked the name of Stanley Hauerwas, a quote from him came to mind that for me connects to Ubuntu around, I think he said, "I don't necessarily myself a Christian, but all my friends do." And so it's like the community forming you and allowing that to be how you own your own personhood and identity within that.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, I love everything about that. And, goodness gracious, to hear you talk about how we all need to hear the Christian story live inside the Christian story, and to recognize what version of that story that is. Because in what we're saying, it's not the win-lose story, it's not the I'm going to heaven and you're going to hell story. It's not the, "I need to work on my own personal salvation project," as Richard likes to say. And I think about Richard in the sunset of his life right now, all the things he's written about. I get this especially with Falling Upward, but what Richard's given us is a different story, and I think a story that is more accurate to what the Christian story was at its origin.

Think about the Apocatastasis and this idea of all of us together moving towards salvation in this life. And I can't be saved and I can't be healthy, happy, and whole if you are not. I think about your book and how you lay out all this wise teaching on contemplation and formation and peacemaking in stories of life of Desmond Tutu. And it makes it real for me. And I'm reading someone else's life who's a gargantuan hero, and yet somehow it makes it real for me. And that's powerful. I appreciate that. I appreciate

Michael Battle: Yeah, thanks. I appreciate the wisdom and acumen that you have over church history, that up until Constantinian Christianity that so-called Universalism wasn't a sin, wasn't heretical. It was the way that we understood salvation. But once Christianity was accommodated by empires was the minute that we lost the interdependency of salvation in our Christian stories. So I appreciate that.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, and it's interesting to think about the fact that taking away interdependency makes us more susceptible to empire and its machinations.

Paul Swanson: Yes, that's beautiful.

Mike Petrow: As we bring our time to a close, one of the questions we like to ask folks at the end of every episode. When we look at *Falling Upwards*, it talks about the two halves of life. But what we find is that in reality, wherever folks are chronologically when they read the story, and it is a great story about how we develop, they are being invited to live all of it at the same time. If I'm chronologically in the first half of life, which I'm not anymore, I'm being invited to incorporate the wisdom of the second half of life. If I'm in the second half of life, I'm being invited to look back and recognize where the journey has taken me. And cherish the wisdom and the path, and remember the value of the first half of life.

And so it's that invitation to do both and to live in the in-between that all our listeners and all our readers are finding themselves in. And that is a very liminal space that we're being asked to live in too. Parting question, how is that real for you living in the in-between? It doesn't need to be about a chronological spot on the journey. Where's that both and most real for you in just the lived reality of your own life right now?

Michael Battle: Yeah, I'll go back to quantum physics. Life is not linear, and the wisdom that Father Richard gives us in *Falling Upward* is not linear also. And the work of wanting to be a mature Christian, I put it that way because that's important. I think God works through our desires. The ability to want to be mature in the Christian life is infectious. It carries with it mirror neurons. So if you are around more mature Christians who have fallen upward, the more you are able to want that as well.

But if you don't have a community in which you are infected by that maturity, you're in the Wild West, you're making up all kinds of religions. We are using Christianity to justify the status quo. But if we can be around a mature community that knows we all are on a journey, and that we also know the power and the truth of Christ and we don't get caught in the weeds of post-truth, of post-modern, of wedding Christianity with echo chambers. If we can move beyond that in a mature Christian life, we put in motion a syncing with, what I mean by that, a wheel and the spokes, they all sync in movement together, we put in motion a life with God.

So in other words, when we are becoming more mature as Christians, we are becoming more like God. And that takes us back to our conversations around early Christianity, that we are not ashamed to be like God, and we actually want to be like God. Come what may, we want to be authentically someone associated with someone who redeems the world.

Paul Swanson: Amen to that. That feels like the great incarnational invitation for our lives. Love others, love God in the deepening way of interdependence modeled on the life of Jesus and the relationships we see of beauty, and also in a Trinitarian dynamic. Michael, this has been an incredible time together. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

Michael Battle: It's been an honor. Hope you invite me back.

Mike Petrow: Well, there's about 100 questions I want to ask, and a bunch more that I want to hear you talk about. Thank you so much for hanging out with us today.

Michael Battle: Thank you, thank you.

Mike Petrow: So great.

Oh my gosh, what an amazing conversation with such an extraordinary human. I cannot say enough good things about Michael Battle and what I feel like I learn from him every time we talk to him. And what an amazing conversational moment to experience the life of Desmond Tutu being compared to the Batman, him going off to train with monks to become equipped for the great work that he has to do in the world. Oh my God.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it's so apparent to see how much Dr. Battle has absorbed from Batman, Desmond Tutu, and gleaned from his teachings and embodiment of this mystical incarnation. And to see him now use his own gifts to teach and distribute and embody and bring this powerful peacemaking in the world through his own endeavors, it was so rich just to even be in his presence and to kick around these thoughts and ideas.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh. And yeah, just what a gift to immerse in that. And it's interesting too, riffing on the Batman thing, I think a lot about the hero's journey. We've had episodes about it, we've had conversations about it this season. And this idea of the hero going off on the lone quest to train and to do their work in the world. But what's interesting with Michael taking us through the concept of Ubuntu, expanding that beyond thinking about me and my calling and my quest and my work and my hero's journey, and realizing it's not about me. I am because we are, that sharing on Ubuntu really, really expands it. It's a game changer.

Paul Swanson: Yes, yes. I'm going to quote his book here of that title, Ubuntu, to further just flesh that out. Michael defines Ubuntu as an African concept of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed interdependently through community. And it's such a flip on a western capitalistic taker mentality of the individual. It centers personhood through community, and to me, that is a much needed expansion in our times.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, I love that. I'm thinking back to, again, our hero's journey episode. We kicked around the concept of what if instead of thinking about the hero's journey, we think about the healer's journey. I do my healing work to bring back medicine for the world and the community. But in surrendering, I don't know if I know how to say this, in surrendering my

individuality and recognizing the community matters more, I'm healed. Does that make any sense?

Paul Swanson: Yes. And your transformation is at the service of the community as well, it's not just for your own betterment. It's not just for the self-help of getting some sort of equilibrium, which is not a bad thing at all, but how do we be interdependently of service to one another for the transformation of all, and how does our personal healing play into the collective healing as well?

Mike Petrow: Well, that's good, Paul, that sounds like it might be leading us to a contemplative prompt for our listeners.

Paul Swanson: Yes, let's bring this to a contemplative prompt on this, on Ubuntu. How does your own concept, your own self-identity as a person, how is that formed through community? How does your community shape you and how do you shape your community? How are those two interdependently entwined in your sense of self?

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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.