



# **EVERYTHING BELONGS**

**A Bright Sadness**  
with Christian Wiman

Paul Swanson: The poet and professor, Christian Wiman, said, “Most of what Christianity ought to be is a poetic religion that teaches away, that gives us models of experiencing the world and not directions for how to be in the world.” Such a poetic modeling of Christianity shares an embodied way of life that hums along with the paradoxes of reality.

St. John of the Cross called it a luminous darkness. Father Richard has dubbed it a bright sadness. It is the shimmering edges of joy amidst abject suffering. It is the suffering befriending joy in the breakthroughs. This presencing in the fullness of life becomes our full participation in the great mystery, in the wonder.

In today’s conversation, Richard welcomes us back to his hermitage to talk about chapter 10, A Bright Sadness. We raise questions to Richard on the necessity of the first half of life and the nuancing of the second half, the cone committance of life’s content and container, and the presence of bright sadness.

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

Paul Swanson: I’m Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs.

Paul Swanson: Richard, thanks for inviting us back to your house even if you weren’t quite so sure about it.

Richard Rohr: Wonderful to have you here.

Paul Swanson: Today, we’re going to talk about chapter 10, A Bright Sadness. And this title, Bright Sadness is so, so sharp and vivid in the mind.

Richard Rohr: Isn’t it?

Paul Swanson: So good.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: And in this chapter of Bright Sadness, you refer to St. John the Cross as luminous darkness, Merton’s dying by the brightness and the Holy Spirit, Gerard Manley, Hopkins’ dearest freshness of deep down things, and there’s this tone to these descriptors that you can immediately recognize or intuit rather than articulate with precision bright sadness. And so I feel like it’s more defined through presence than by words, how they’re emblematic of the second half of life, these somewhat paradoxical words. And I feel like each reference I just made exemplifies that. Can you state a little bit about Bright Sadness, how that is kind of atmospherically emblematic of the second half of life?

Richard Rohr: I think it’s what drew me to writing this latest book on tears. Somehow when sadness, tears being the metaphor for sadness, when they’re true, when they’re deserved, when they’re appropriate, there’s something very bright and clarifying about them not to be afraid to weep over reality.

As I write this book, I just keep being more and more convinced how tears is an appropriate response to reality, and I think it always will be. And yet, that doesn’t mean, don’t equate

that with modern depression or cynicism. It's the acceptance of what you cannot change that normally makes people cry. The acceptance of it, he's dead forever.

I look at these people in Palestine looking at their father or child. I'm choking more than ever as I see these pictures. This is now forever. He will never come back. But the part of you that surrenders to that is bright. It's a love of reality. And God is always present in reality as it is, not as it should be.

It's so hard for even believers to accept. It's hard for me to accept. I teach it better than I do it, but I am convinced it's true. And when you meet people who can smile in the presence of sadness, there's some brightness about that. What I mean by that is clarity, truth, freedom. Use all the good words because for, one thing, you know you can't fake it. It has to be authentic. And you yourself wonder where it came from. Why am I smiling now, or why am I bright? It's not the usual kind of brightness.

Mike Petrow: I think about some of us who've had the experience of either laughing ourselves to tears or crying ourselves to laughter.

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's well put. Yes.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Richard, the spiritual director who introduced me to your work, I had gone to see her, and I had all these sort of the very first time she and I met, I held these deep theological questions. And she let me talk for a while and then sort of laughed at me and said, "These are not your real questions." And I said, "Okay.

Richard Rohr: Really?

Mike Petrow: Tell me what my real question is." And she said, "You want to know why you've had so much loss in your life?" And as soon as she said that, I broke down, and I started to cry. And I think everyone listening who's experienced a lot of loss can relate to this. I just said, "Do you ever come back from so much heartbreak?" And she said, "The interesting thing is," she said, "Yes." She said, "The people I've known, the great teachers, the great mystics who've suffered and worked their way through it, find that the suffering carves a space out in your heart. And in that wide open space, you can feel not only your pain but the pain of others and the pain of the world."

Richard Rohr: Yes. That's right.

Mike Petrow: And so you are quick to tears for the rest of your life. But she said, "That same space also holds joy." And she said, "The people I know who've really faced suffering and tragedy are also the quickest to tears, but the quickest to laughter, and the quickest to joy." I feel like, Richard, that's the wisdom of an elder. That's hard to grasp.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. First half of life, you couldn't be there yet. You couldn't. Yeah. I've seen some of the young people in Gaza just with a look of terror on their face at the dead body of their mother or father in front of them, just terror. This is an incoherent world. I went off the ship.

Paul Swanson: Whenever my kids run to give me a hug before they go to school, I've been trying to allow

that to be like a prayer bell for those who have lost their children because-

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's beautiful.

Paul Swanson: ... it connects for me the sense of my immense gratitude and just soaking up the love for them, but trying to participate in that while also recognizing there are those who are living the inverse, who they don't get that hug again. They're in that devastation. And how can I step into some sort of solidarity through prayer from far away? And how can we bring in more of these kind of connective tissues across waters and continents that suffering does connect us, that love for our families does connect us.

Richard Rohr: The act of solidarity somehow cancels the pain, the infinite pain, what feels like, "Okay, I choose to carry it with you. Now, it's half carried by you, by me." It's really an alchemy.

Mike Petrow: It is.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. And I wonder about, that's something... I appreciate you saying alchemy because when you said that it cancels the pain, my immediate question for you was, is that a transformation of the pain? Is it a transfiguration of it?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Because what I've learned from you is it doesn't go away.

Richard Rohr: No.

Mike Petrow: But it lives differently in our hearts.

Richard Rohr: Lives differently. Good phrase. Yeah. It lives tolerably. You don't love it, but you have the grace of tolerating it. Not with resistance now, but with, yes. That can't come in a moment. It can't come until maturity, I don't think. Thank you for understanding. I don't know why I thought you wouldn't. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: One thing that Bright Sadness reminded us of as we were talking about this was Christian Wiman's work, *My Bright Abyss*.

Richard Rohr: Oh, go ahead. Go ahead.

Paul Swanson: And he wrote that book as he's facing, I want to say, his cancer that seemed like it was going to take him out.

Richard Rohr: Fatal. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Fatal Cancer. And he wrote this poem called *My Bright Abyss*. It's marvelous book-

Richard Rohr: Oh, it's marvelous.

Paul Swanson: ... where he talks about walking through that journey into staring to the void and then also the brightness that kind of came out of that. What do you remember from that book? And why did that impact you so much?

Richard Rohr: My Bright Abyss, thank you. I never made that. I knew I loved that book, but that it was another Bright Sadness. Bright Abyss didn't connect with me. What it's mainly telling me, I need to reread that book. I remember saying this is faith, and it's distilled pure form without all the religious trappings, pure naked faith. Sometimes, I've been wondering lately if good poets are not exactly the same as contemplatives. They're the same thing, good poets. And not all are good.

Mike Petrow: That's interesting. So this is a broad question, but I think it actually gets to what you're saying. One of the things you mentioned in this chapter is that the 10 Commandments are really helpful in the first half of life.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: But then we grow into the Beatitudes in the second.

Richard Rohr: Yes, I believe that.

Mike Petrow: And it's interesting because in scripture and in the contemplative tradition, there are all these hints about how our guidance system grows up with us... I love Origen. Origen says we start with the thinking of the Proverbs, which is formulas for how to live. Then we move to Ecclesiastes where we have to ask hard questions of those things, and face life and loss, and be taught by nature.

But we end in the Song of Songs with the dance of love, lost and found, and the wisdom of grounded ambiguity and love. And Song of Songs is poetry. So all that to say, what is it about our movement from practical rules and belief systems to poetic thinking in the second half of life?

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And how does the divine live in that poesis, if you will.

Richard Rohr: Well, first answer is, I don't know. I don't have a clue. But I know it's true. And they're the last. What you just charted and you know this is order, disorder, reorder.

Mike Petrow: Absolutely.

Richard Rohr: Origen, already got it.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Why am I not surprised?

Mike Petrow: I've never, till this conversation though, thought about reorder as a poetic existence. That's really fascinating.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. The poetry of Christian Wiman is reorder. He's thinking at a different level. That's good. He's feeling at a different level. And he was raised, if by memory, evangelical Texas Christian. So order was completely in place, and what he had to suffer to let go of that artificial order to accept divine disorder, which is itself reorder.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Gosh. I'm reminded too, Richard, as we talk about poets and this contemplative connection and what you shared at sit this morning, the Merton's prayer of, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going." And I do not know if I'm in your will or doing your will, but my desire is to do your will.

Richard Rohr: Desire to do your will.

Paul Swanson: That connection of desire within that bright sadness.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I wonder if you could-

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: ... speak to that a little bit, how that connects in this.

Richard Rohr: It ties in with the other great female contemplative trees of Avalon who says, "You must desire. Pray when you don't desire. Pray for the desire to desire," because without desire, the trajectory is not urgent. It's not set. It's not going someplace bigger. And here, that very thing most of us equated with sin, covetousness to desire is always sex, always bad. Oh, come on.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting thinking about A Bright Sadness and just having referenced earlier that so many Christian contemplatives talk about the wisdom of the Song of Songs being that late-stage wisdom that comes in.

Desire is a big part of that. And Origen summarizes that as it's saying, "Sometimes, the divine is there and present with me. And then when I have it and I experience it, it slips away, and my quest begins anew." And this is that desire, the rhythm of love, lost and found, and lost again, and found again seems to be part of this bright sadness, is being content in the desire and in recognizing that some moments it's there and some moments it's not. Does that resonate, Richard? You've been doing this twice as long as Paul and I. Does that feel right? And if so, how do you ride that rhythm?

Richard Rohr: Repeat what feels right.

Mike Petrow: The fact that sometimes the divine is so present with you, and sometimes, it feels absent. Sometimes, life's-

Richard Rohr: Well, that's for sure.

Mike Petrow: ... laughter.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And sometimes, it's tears. Yeah. What could you share with us about that rhythm of presence and absence, and how the desire keeps you going?

Richard Rohr: I'm just speaking in the moment. The way I experience brightness is a new clarity. The light is illuminating it better. And that's what sadness can often give to you. A new clarity about the tragic sense of life-

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: ... is not inappropriate. It's, in fact, what Jesus had to accept on the cross, the utterly tragic sense of life. And if that's clarifying, it's bright.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: And I'd rather live with that brightness than the brightness of happy words in a little children's lullaby. I'm glad for that for children's sake. But that isn't bright. It's cute. You remember CS Lewis's four words for love, agape, the highest level. Eros, the generalized attraction of things to things. What's the third?

Mike Petrow: Philia, right?

Richard Rohr: Philia, friendship. Friendship. Just as you feel drawn to this, especially, friendship has to have a special character to it. And then we used to laugh about this at New Jerusalem because I'd often refer to the four loves. They were all teenagers, all trying to figure out what love was. And the fourth word is even a funny Greek word. It's storge. And I said, "It's when things are cute," little teddy bears are storge love. I just love that little teddy bear. And it's true. I don't want to take that away from you, but storge love doesn't get you anywhere.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: And the kids would get back at me. Then I'd be preaching about something profound that I thought was profound. They'd say, "Storge."

Mike Petrow: That's amazing.

Richard Rohr: We confuse cuteness with beauty. And it isn't. But it's all the little child is capable of. Why make that small? That's cute. A man who's done our rights emailed me yesterday. He took his little eight-year-old daughter to a Renaissance fair, and they were all dressed up like some medieval Renaissance figure.

And he saw his eight-year-old daughter. Her eyes meet an eight-year-old boy who was just as cute and handsome as you can imagine. Her voice just started shaking. And he said, "I knew what was happening to this little girl. Ha, ha, ha." He's just too cute for words. You wouldn't take that. You've got to start with storge.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: If things can't be cute and attractive, I mean, he said, "I saw my daughter in her first

moment of female hormones totally taking over.” He said, “She actually began to stutter.” And he just loved it, but he knew there’s no way she could understand what was happening. Your girl.

Mike Petrow: No. That’s so great. And I’m turning to look at Paul as the parent in the room in that I love that about the storge. And one of the things I’ve been wondering about lately is why fairy tales have so much darkness and sadness in them. And I’m wondering if it’s what you’re talking about because that storge needs an education in the bright sadness.

Richard Rohr: Excellent, because the fantasy land is too pretty.

Paul Swanson: I was thinking too about as you were talking, when you were talking about the cute lullabies and how those aren’t the ones that have stood the test of time, I think we’re drowning in them right now.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Ring around the rosie, A pocket full of posy. That’s about the plague, isn’t it? The melodies are cute, but there’s a sadness to them, and I do think with the fairy tales-

Richard Rohr: And their incompleteness.

Paul Swanson: And their incompleteness.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, that’s right.

Paul Swanson: And the fairy tales hold some of that heavy weight of potential and possibility, but it’s always with danger. Right? This goes back to what we’ve talked about the hero’s journey, but it even seated in our children’s stories is this bright sadness. It’s almost like you have to know that’s going to be part of the journey, that it’s not going to be candy land all the way up and down.

Richard Rohr: Gosh, beautiful. Then the story gets better. This man, I’m just thinking of it. After she had her enthralled, he’d encounter with another nine-year-old handsome boy. She saw a booth. They were at a Renaissance fair. Did I tell you that?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: A booth on how to dress up like a princess, and said, “Daddy, take me there. I want to be a princess.” Of course, she does. It’s another kind of bright sadness. You know it’s total illusion. And yet you and I went through that, I’m sure. I don’t remember it, but I’m sure we did.

Paul Swanson: Oh, I still want to be a pirate.

Richard Rohr: A pirate?

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: To enthrall some little princess. Oh, god. Gender is so exciting, the whole spectrum of gender.



Paul Swanson: Yes, indeed. Many colors in that rainbow.

Richard Rohr: I'm just babbling.

Paul Swanson: No.

Richard Rohr: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Paul Swanson: Did she have something you wanted to add regarding this?

Mike Petrow: No, just all of this. All of this. I can't help but go back again and again and again to that line from that TS Eliot poem that I so appreciate, "Will not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place."

Richard Rohr: For the first time. Very good. He was a contemplative. We visited his tomb once way in the back of a little Anglican church in some little town in England. And I walked in, wasn't prepared. My God, that great man, TS Eliot, is laying here in the back of a church.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: You just found out how do you put such bigness in such containment?

Paul Swanson: That's a great metaphor for the human experience too. Such greatness in such a little container.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. How do you hold? Yeah.

Paul Swanson: As we wrap this up, Richard, and we think about bright sadness, do you feel like you can trust an elder knowing that there's a lot of elders listening who does not?

Richard Rohr: A lot of what?

Paul Swanson: Elders, folks in the second half of life, elders, who does not have the bright sadness. Do you feel like bright sadness is a key component of somebody who is wherever they are in linear time is living from the depths?

Richard Rohr: There isn't some hint of that there, which is the ability to flourish inside of paradox. If you don't see that in some way, they're not in the second half of life. They're not evolved. They're not enlightened. Use whatever word you want.

The insistence on consistency is a false insistence. It looks like rationality, but it's really boring.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: It gives you false comfort. I'm looking down at that fall pear tree in my front yard. The background sky is blue. But right now, in mid-November, the tree is still green and newly golden and, in some cases, brown all on one tree. It's southern fall winter spring, one tree.

Mike Petrow: I spent some time with a friend of mine who's an Episcopal priest this weekend, and we were

up in Chaco Canyon and then sitting around a campfire under the Milky Way. And we were talking about the phrase, “Remember you are dust.”

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And we were saying how that reminds us how small we are in the grand scheme of things, but also as Carl Sagan used to say, “We’re stardust.”

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: We’re made of the same things that the stars are made of.” And that double-sided-

Richard Rohr: Objectively true.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. The paradox in that, it’s beautiful.

Richard Rohr: It is. And it’s beautiful to recognize that. It gives the soul comfort. That’s what beauty does. And you fours aren’t entirely wrong when you say, “The world will be saved by beauty. The world will be saved by beauty.”

Mike Petrow: Was that Dostoevsky? I love that.

Richard Rohr: That’s what I’m seeing in that pear tree out by a window right now. Oh.

Paul Swanson: Well, it looks like you’re looking right at me.

Richard Rohr: The world will be saved by be Paul. It’s a little above your head, Paul.

Paul Swanson: Wait, wait. Literally, intellectually.

Richard Rohr: The world will be saved by beauty.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard for inviting us into this Bright Sadness.

Richard Rohr: Thank you sincerely for hearing it.

Mike Petrow: Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Today, we’re joined by Christian Wiman, an author, editor, and translator of more than a dozen books of poetry and prose, including *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, and his most recent book, *Zero at the Bone: Fifty Entries Against Despair*. Wiman is the winner of the Ambassador Book Award. He’s a national book Critics Circle Award finalist, and he teaches religion and literature at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music at Yale Divinity School. Christian, thank you so much for joining us today, the Everything Belongs podcast.

Christian Wiman: It’s great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It’s our thrill and our pleasure. So in this season of this podcast, we’re talking about Father Richard Rohr’s book, *Falling Upward* and how we can live those teachings forward.

As a place to begin to talk about some of your work, I want to ask you something that you said on Fresh Air that really moved me when I first heard it three or four months ago, and I've shared it on this podcast. I've shared it with a bunch of friends.

So I'm going to parrot it back to you, and I'd love to hear if you can expand on it. You said most of what Christianity ought to be is a poetic religion that teaches a way, that gives us models of experiencing the world and not directions for how to be in the world. And this is such a gem for me. It really resonates deeply for my own approach to Christianity. I'd be curious if you could take that a step further into detail. What do you mean by a poetic religion that teaches away?

Christian Wiman: Well, I think so much of Christianity as it's come down to us, has been defined by doctrine and propositions, and certain things that you have to assent to. And I find it a great relief if I'm able to relate to the gospel and the way that I relate to poetry.

Poetry has been the way that my spiritual life has been sustained over the years. And I wouldn't be a Christian without poetry. It gave me a sense of something other in reality and a need to pursue it. I think that transition to having a specific religious commitment was a difficult one for me because all I had grown up with was a notion of Christianity as this thing that you had to assent to in certain ways and make some sort of an intellectual assent.

There is that in Christianity, but the primary teaching of Jesus I think is that He is a way, the truth, and the life, and that there is a way that we can follow God that is more instinctive than we allow it to be, that we have to learn to trust our instincts. And for me, that's always come through poetry. So learning to read the Bible as poetry is something that I've worked hard at. I'm working at it now. I'm thinking about writing a book about this actually. But yeah, that's the gist of what I was getting at with that statement.

Paul Swanson: Well, please do write that book. I think you'd have a couple of eager readers here because I love that sense of reading the Bible as poetry.

Mike Petrow: Indeed.

Paul Swanson: And there's certain books that obviously lend themselves to that a little bit easier than others. How have you worked with the malleable nature of Scripture as poetry? I myself was raised in the evangelical world. And so there was this literal sense of how to read the Bible and trying to allow the flowering of a poetic perspective on it is a muscle that I'm trying to build. I'm just curious for you, how did you move and build that muscle up?

Christian Wiman: I would say I'm doing it now. I'm still working at it, but it really has to do with applying the knowledge that I've gained from reading poetry to Scripture. I mean a good example, there are a couple of examples that I could give, I was talking to a class the other day about Psalm 148, and in that Psalm, whether it's David or whoever, enjoins us to praise God with everything that's in us, but then he also enjoins nature to praise God, the seed to praise God, and animals to praise God.

And so if you read that, you're thinking, "Well, what can that mean?" And Augustine, when he read it thought, "Creatures nature and creatures aren't sentient, so he must have meant that through our attention to them, they become fully manifest to God or they are able to

realize their whole reality.”

And that’s a wrong step, I think. I think we have to let the text say what it’s saying. And what it’s saying there actually is that, in some way, reality as it is, existence as it is, is praising God in being simply what it is. And that fits very well if you think about it with notions of quantum entanglement and the way in which our atoms are raveled with all of reality and the way in which the idea of consciousness is now being extended to all kinds of things beyond humans.

Most scientists think of consciousness as a kind of smear rather than a line where it starts with humans. And so you can read that verse from Psalm 148 as being, incredibly modern if you just let it be the poem that it is, rather than trying to make it accord with our intellectual understandings of what’s real.

I reviewed a wonderful book recently by a guy named Michael Edwards, and he’s an English scholar. But the book is written in French, and he wrote about the Bible and poetry and how to read the Bible as poetry, very helpful book. He was an adult convert to Christianity, and he uses as one example the line, this is my body from the Lord’s Supper, and he says that Catholics have... They’ve overinterpreted the line and interposed prescriptions like there has to be a priest administering this. You have to have certain rights, et cetera, et cetera.

And the consecration has to happen, and people get left out of it. Whereas Protestants have undervalued the verb in that sentence of this is my body. And he says, “If we can learn to read that poetically, we can split the difference.” He doesn’t say, “Split the difference.” That’s a kind of diminishment of what he says, but he does say that in some ways misreading and, in fact, over-reading lines of scripture cause a lot of antagonisms within Christianity that don’t need to be there.

Mike Petrow: That’s so absolutely fascinating. I know we’re jumping right into the deep end at the top here, and I love it. Christian, I’m an Origenist. And one of the things I love about reading a lot of Origen’s writing is that he really does emphasize thing is the non-literal interpretation of scripture. But what has surprised me was when he would write about other theologians and scholars who would change to make the text fit what they wanted it to mean.

And so to read the sort of great parent of non-literal interpretation saying, “Hey, even I am saying we don’t get to change the text to make it fit our schema, the first ground of reading Scripture is to let the words say what they actually say to give it at its own voice.”

Christian Wiman: Yeah. And this is part of the reason why I think it’s dangerous to think that you can corral the Bible with a set of doctrines or something because it’s so contradictory. And I think part of its power is, in fact, in those contradictions. And learning to read it poetically is learning to inhabit that space wherein two things can be true at the same time without you having to marshal one into being true and one false.

Mike Petrow: That’s so wild. I can’t help, and we’re going to get into all this I hope in the next few minutes as we get deeper into our conversation, but you lead me to wonder how often we take the stories of our own lives and try to corral our own life story into a script or a theological narrative that we’re told it’s supposed to align with. And we lose the wildness. I love that you use that word corral because it makes me think of scripture and life as this wild horse that’s

just refuses to be domesticated.

Christian Wiman: Yeah. When I was young, I always had a sense, and even into middle age, had a sense that at some point in my life was going to cohere, that I would be able to look back, and it would make a kind of sense, like a work of art or something. And part of the impetus for writing my most recent book, that *Zero at the Bone*, is trying to come to terms with the fact that that will never happen, that the book almost ends with a poem where it says, "Loss is my gift, bewilderment my bow." And I think that's the best I can do there, is a bewilderment at the end, but trying to learn to praise that bewilderment rather than deforming it into some kind of coherence.

Mike Petrow: Wow. Well, and I love that. So we're in this podcast, in this season, we're talking about Richard's book, *Falling Upward*. And he posits that there is two different types of wisdom, a wisdom that you have in the first half of life, and then you move into the second half of life, and there's a different type of wisdom.

I want to pause right now for the whole season and just sit with what you just said about bewilderment because I think even in a light reading of Richard's book, it's so easy to think, "Well, when I get to the second half of life, it's all going to make sense." And that is not at all what I hear you saying, Christian. Is there a comfort in the bewilderment?

Christian Wiman: Well, there is. I guess there is at times and there isn't at times. At times, I am thrown back into thinking that I'm going to understand these things that I've pursued all my life. I definitely have a sense of having relaxed my hold somewhat on that need to understand, that need to eliminate the difficult abrading sort of uncertainty that comes into our lives. There's a kind of uncertainty that can be provocative and helpful. And then there's a kind of uncertainty that can be destructive that we don't come to terms with. And that always seems like we're intention with. And I think I've gotten much better at existing within that state of uncertainty that is helpful and is aligned with the life of God as I understand I.

Paul Swanson: If I'm not mistaken, that line you shared, is that from the poem, *No Omen but Awe*?

Christian Wiman: Yes. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Because that feels connected to bewilderment, just this sense of awe. How does awe offer this place of spaciousness in the incoherence of our lives, in the wild tragic comedy of reality? What role does awe play as we seek to go here but kind of fall into bewilderment? How do you put awe in those positions?

Christian Wiman: Yeah. I think probably maturity is learning to see those things as coextensive bewilderment and awe. I'm a great devotee of Abraham Joshua Heschel who says that, "Wonder is the precondition for all wisdom," that everything that we think of as wisdom, all of these statements that help us to live and guide our lives by, they begin in a condition of inarticulate wonder.

And for me, that's what poetry has been for me are these experiences of wonder. And all the prose that I've written has been ex-post facto. It's been trying to figure out what those moments of wonder were and what I meant to do with them. Marilynne Robinson said a beautiful thing in an interview the other day. I just did a podcast with her yesterday actually.

But in an interview in the New York Times, the interviewer said that he had these moments of wonder or awe in his life, but he wasn't a religious person, and they stopped him short, but he never did anything.

He felt like maybe there was something wrong with him, but that they never forced him to do anything further. And he said, "What's wrong with me?" And Marilynne said, "Well, maybe nothing. Maybe, it can be enough simply to realize that reality is addressed to you, that in these moments, it can seem as if all of reality is addressed to you, specifically." This immense cosmos seems to have an attention. And suddenly, you're the attention. And there's nothing egotistical about because, in fact, in those moments is as if yourself is blasted away.

And it's not this personality, you, Mike, and Paul who are being addressed. It's the deepest you that you are. As Augustine said, "You are in me deeper than I am in me of God." And so for me, I think those moments do lead me to need some sort of specific commitment to God, which is a conscious commitment, but Marilynne was probably right, that there are others for whom if they can simply recognize that those moments are giving them an insight into a reality that is greater than them, that's enough.

Mike Petrow: It leads me to wonder, this thing I've been pondering for years and years, the only real answer to theodicy is theophany. The only answer to the question of why do bad things happen is, I don't know, but it seems that ultimate reality shows up in the midst of it.

Christian Wiman: Well, that's what happens in the Book of Job.

Mike Petrow: Exactly.

Christian Wiman: Yeah. After all of his questions, what he gets is a theophany. He gets this blast of beauty, and it hardly answers the questions he's been answering.

Mike Petrow: Well, and then I can't help but wonder, I know we're way off script. We'll get back on track in a minute, but I can't help but wonder then. Christian, you mentioned the wonder and the wisdom. How that's connected to our wounding and the wanderings that the wounding leads us to/

Christian Wiman: Yeah. There is some inexplicable connection between suffering and joy. One of the greatest graces of this existence is that we are able to experience joy in the midst of suffering. We might not be able to experience happiness. You can't, in the midst of suffering. But there can be moments of great joy in the midst of the worst suffering. I take that to reveal that these two things are raveled up in ways that we don't understand, but which are essential to our existence, learning to inhabit the space where those two things reflect each other, joy and suffering.

Mike Petrow: Would you say just one more minute about the difference between happiness and joy for some of our listeners who might not get that nuance?

Christian Wiman: Well, I think of happiness as being on a chronological plane, so that we look at a period of our lives and we say, "We're happy." And it's over a span of time, and joy cuts in from above. It's kairological in the Greek terms, Kairos instead of Kronos. And so, it's a vertical entry into our lives. And you can have a moment of joy that illuminates the

happiness of your life. There's a wonderful poem called Small Moth by a woman named Sarah Lindsay in which she's cutting the bananas for the cereal, and the Tony the Tiger Sun Bowl for her child, and the dog is vibrating beside the table, and then she sees this small moth, and she says, "There it is." It's for one instant happiness.

And it's paused as if it wants to fly away again, so that she sees this moment of ordinary domestic responsibility in which if you've ever had kids, you know it can be a drudge. And you go through these things mechanically. And suddenly, she has a moment of what I think is real joy cut into her life in the form of that small moth. She uses the word happiness, but that moment of joy lets her see her life. It's like it casts a sharp light that spreads out and see that she's actually happy in her life, but it's a moment of joy that has enabled that. I think that's one way of seeing that difference.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, that's beautiful. I love that. Well, that's great, and that's a perfect entry into our next question for you. So Christian, you're a poet, a professor, a parent, a partner. I would say a person, a purposeful paradox. You wear a lot of hats.

Your book, *My Bright Abyss*, has been a comfort to so many friends, mentors, and dialogue partners of mine who found it to be a sort of light in the dark for them in difficult seasons of their life. In your latest book, *Zero at the Bone: Fifty Entries Against Despair*, you write about your quest to write a book true to the storm of form and needs, the intuitions and possibilities that I feel myself to be and that I feel life to be.

In your work, you write beautifully about the harsh realities of life, and you do share from your story of being diagnosed with a rare form of cancer at the age of 39. Before we go any further, and we will ask a lot more questions, if you're willing to share, how is your health now in all the ways? And how are you finding joy at the present time in your life?

Christian Wiman: My health is great now. I didn't think I would live to see this book published because last one year ago, exactly... Let's see, what is this? March 15th? Yeah. One year ago exactly, I had what's called Car T-cell therapy, and I was really done.

And so I spent five weeks in Boston, and they took out all my T cells, and genetically re-engineered them at a lab in Colorado, and then put them back into my body. And it worked. And I'm one of the first people with my disease in this country to get it. I think there are three of us. And, yeah, it worked completely in so far as we can tell. So, yeah, my health is really good.

It can be very difficult to reorient yourself to your life after going through something like that. Everyone thinks, "Well, you'll just be jubilant." And you are jubilant. But it is a very strange, an unpleasant feeling actually just to step back into life as if nothing had happened. Suddenly, you've got all your same middling anxieties, and you're just going through your days with a kind of busy laziness, and it can be difficult. And so the last year has been really trying to accommodate myself to that and difficult for the people around you too. My wife and kids also went through that and have been now on the other side. And so that's what the last year has been, really.

Paul Swanson: Wow. Thank you for sharing that. Thinking about this last year of your life, and there's something that you write in your latest book, *Zero at the Bone* where you say a true poem



leaps beyond the particularity of one's person's existence into existence itself.

And so I'm thinking about the way that you write about your very particular existence and the art form that you craft and embody and bring forth to the world. How did that experience of that last year, the long road of your health and with this particular cancer offer something that you want to bring into the world at a larger scale from this very personal experience to a very public forum as a poet, as a professor? It's taking life and death from a very private experience. And you so beautifully share it, and it honors everyone that you bring it into the fullness of existence through your writing, through your art.

When you take that journey from personal, from the particular to more universal space, how does that impact you as the person who's gone through that, who's offering this wisdom from that experience? Does that make sense?

Christian Wiman: Yeah. I'm still a writer to my bones. I write the things I write in complete solitude with no sense of an audience, just trying to work out something that's in me. And then I do go out in public, and I'm aware that, yeah, people have all these reactions to it, and they expect certain things from me, some of which I can't meet. I don't think of myself as a very wise person, in all honesty.

I think of myself as very confused and always wrestling with that confusion. So that can create some odd situations, but some useful situations too. I am much more conscious now of my audience. I don't know how that affects me in my study writing. But after *My Bright Abyss*, I realize that there are just so many people in the world in American life who are struggling with the same things that I am desperately wanting to be close to a God, desperately feeling themselves mired in a culture that seems inimical to that, and always seeking some way of negotiating that.

In one way, I find it painful to recognize that this state of consciousness is so endemic. But in another, it's very hopeful because it does suggest that faith, as we understand it, is changing and that it's being brought forth in the work and lives of all kinds of very different people. And I find that a great consolation. And I think art is a huge part of that. But a lot of what we used to expect from theology or from religious ceremony iconography, a lot of people are now finding an art.

For me, that wasn't enough. I relied on art as my primary source of meaning for many, many years. But at some point, it became obvious that there was a conscious leap to make beyond that, that all of these unconscious sources demanded of me some sort of conscious commitment. But, again, as Marilynne told that interviewer, maybe that's not true for everyone.

Paul Swanson: I didn't mean to overly butter your bread with the wisdom line there, but I was going to say, I think you write so eloquently of the confusion. And for those of us who are muddled by our own confusion, you help us try to resonate with the voice that you're offering. And I think about what you just said instead of with faith, instead of beginning with an end in mind, there seems to be this evolution of faith of beginning and the middle that we're trying to work it out from inside of it, rather, instead of taking beliefs and being like, "I have to believe this is a starting place to work it out," of what it means to be a person of faith, to be



in a relationship with a God of mystery or unknowing, that we're still, that we're now finding more undefinable in ways.

We're settling for fewer prescriptions than I think, previously, particularly in Christianity. And so I think I just want to just echo, I so appreciate the way that you're naming arts as something that can offer these places of revelation and revealing of being in that muddy middle, being in the confusion, because that confusion to me is such a sign of longing. It's a longing for the mutuality, for the connection.

Christian Wiman: Yeah. I'm conscious of my mind being... And I think it's a very modern condition of being sort of perpetually against, like, perpetually critical questioning everything that comes in and almost not allowing certain intrusions of wonder or joy. Paul Tillich has a wonderful perception where he says that one of the great difficulties is simply accepting that we're accepted.

And I think, for me, part of maturing in my spiritual life has been allowing myself to be consoled, allowing consolation to come, rather than always being sort of girded against it or just sort of stiffened, stiffened with a critical attitude, a distrust, a mistrust. You can go through your life like that, and you simply don't accept that you're accepted or allow yourself to be consoled.

I once heard of a famous poet, this was years ago. I was in my 20s, and he was giving reading talk in California, and he'd said with contempt the phrase, "The poetry of consolation." And that's a very modern idea of art, that it has to disturb you in some way. It has to shake you up. And, of course, art does disturb us. It does shake us up. But another part of art is to console, I think. And to forfeit that capacity is a huge loss.

Mike Petrow: So interesting. I'm thinking about, not to make this abstract, but there's a Jungian analyst named Fanny Brewster who I'm a big fan of her work. And I recently heard her talk about, she said that when we face the paradoxes in ourselves, and we have to end up in a situation where we can't help but face our own internal paradoxes or we have to face the paradoxes of our life, it changes us forever. It changes the way we think. And then that makes us more capable of facing the paradoxes in life and in the people around us.

And it seems like there's almost a gentleness and a spaciousness that allows for that. Fanny Brewster's a Jungian... was one of the few BIPOC Jungian analysts in the world, and she writes about issues of race and heavy stuff, strong prophetic voice, definitely not someone who's afraid to tremor the water or talk about challenge where it exists. But this reality that facing those paradoxes creates a place of a spacious place of acceptance in a way is very, very interesting to me. I don't know if any of that makes sense, but that's where kind of my mind was going.

Christian Wiman: Do you remember any of those specific examples of paradox?

Mike Petrow: I think she was talking to a group of individuals in the conversation that we had this in. And she was initially talking about them facing their own internal paradoxes, the contradictions in themselves, and letting that be the starting place for then dealing with a paradoxical reality.

Christian Wiman: And what's an example of a paradox in oneself?

Mike Petrow: I think about something you said, Christian. It's the idea of letting multiple things be true at the same time. I don't want to put my story on your story, but I'm thinking about what you shared with us about the space that you're in right now, of at one point, not thinking you'd be alive right now. And here we are having this conversation and assuming from what you said, there's an elation and a gratitude, and yet also a sort of a difficulty in the reintegration of life and letting both of those things be true at the same time. Does that make sense?

Christian Wiman: Yeah. Yeah, that does. I haven't heard of her, but I wrote down the name Fanny Brewster, B-R-E-W-S-T-E-R?

Mike Petrow: B-R-E-W-S-T-E-R, yeah.

Christian Wiman: Okay.

Mike Petrow: But I wonder about the sort of everything you're talking about, even in the way that we're talking about the divine is a place of letting a lot of paradoxes exist simultaneously, or in a younger season of our life, we might've thought about as contradictions.

Paul Swanson: This is a major theme of what we often talk about in this podcast. This conversation is great love and great suffering as things that can feel like they're two opposites. But yet, they can also coexist at the same time. You can experience great suffering in the midst of great love. And I want to quote you something that you wrote in your latest book and then ask you a question about this that relates also to the way that we think art connects to this as well.

So you write, "People who have been away from God tend to come back by one of two ways, extreme lack or extreme love, an overmastering sorrow or a strangely disabling joy, either the world is not enough for the whole that has opened in you, or it is too much." And this really matches so much of the framework of *Falling Upward* for great love or great suffering tend to be these catalysts for transformation.

And then you go on to say more about what this chapter circles around that we're talking about today, which what Richard calls *A Bright Sadness*. You write the most authentic spiritual existence, inheres in the being able to perceive one state when you are squarely in the midst of another, the mortal sorrow that shadows even the most intense joy, the immortal joy that can give even the darkest sorrow of fugitive gleam.

I think it's so often is revealed and poetry is revealed in art, but I'd be curious for you, do you think that, in your sense, is it innate or do you feel like it's something that someone must first experience or grow into at the cellular level within the body of life before they can participate and fully realize it in art?

Christian Wiman: Probably. I wouldn't want to say that I'm always reluctant to make suffering a kind of ticket into understanding, or probably there are gradations of understanding. I do think suffering changes your mind, reforms your mind so that you perceive the world very differently.

I think probably Richard is quoting Alexander Schmemmann when he says that a bright

sadness, Schmemmann defines Christianity as a bright sorrow. Yeah. That's one of the real paradoxes of our lives, I think, is the kind of the way we were talking, the way joy and suffering get mingled. There's a chapter in this book that talks about this. But my neighbor, they're gone now, but we are very close to them. We shared a backyard. And our families were just very close, and they lost their child, and it was a stillborn, born dead, is a complete surprise. And out of that experience, it was tremendously sorrowful as you can imagine, and traumatic for everyone concerned, but especially them.

But out of that experience, there was also this light, this grace that you could feel in the lives of the people around them and many of whom came here for the funeral or in the days after. And I remember talking with them that one of the great difficulties was thinking that this light came out of such darkness that the one was required for the other, and being almost offended at God that life would be arranged this way.

And in the piece I wrote, I suggested that maybe at some point, part of grace is not having to think about where grace happens or mechanics of grace or anything like that. And in my own experience that when I was in Boston for five weeks, I had two friends come. And one is a Jewish Buddhist woman that I've been friends with for almost 40 years, and the other is a Palestinian Irish novelist that I've also been friends with for almost 40 years.

And they came at different times and stayed with me the whole time because I couldn't be alone at all because the treatment causes these bizarre neurological symptoms. And part of what was most astonishing and moving about that time was how close we were.

I've written about this, I think, or maybe I just talked about it, but it was as if... Oh, no. I did write about it. Yeah. It was as if I felt as if Christ was with us in those interactions, even though they're not Christians at all, and I wouldn't impose that on them, but I think the life of Christ exceeds Christianity. And Richard talks about that in his Cosmic Christ, I think it's called.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. universal Christ.

Christian Wiman: Yeah, Universal Christ. Yeah. And it was just such a powerful experience as if the suffering mine but also theirs for me had stripped away everything, and we were able to interact soul to soul as it were.

Mike Petrow: Just given that a minute.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I really appreciate that everything you've just said there, Christian, from one, the reluctance to make suffering a ticket to all the way walking us through this, the reality of that depth of encounter.

Paul Swanson: And just to jump in for a hot second, just the way you spoke to of the presence of Christ, and I think that is one thing that I just am so grateful for in the Universal Christ, if nothing else, is that phrase of Christ-soaked world. It's just a beauty.

Christian Wiman: Yeah. Christ came into a Christ-soaked world. Yes. I think that's a brilliant way of

putting it.

Paul Swanson: Yes. I just want to interject that. Sorry, Mike.

Mike Petrow: No. No. I'm still thinking about your comment earlier about Job and this idea that the divine shows up in the midst of that. One of our teachers, Jim Finley here has this... Tell me if I get this wrong, he has this saying, he says it over and over and over again, "If we're absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing but sustains us in all things, then we can touch the hurting places in ourselves and others with love."

Christian Wiman: That's beautiful.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. And I just say here, I appreciate so much that mystery, even the depth of encounter that you've just shared in people coming together in those moments where all pretense seems to be stripped away. Sorry. I'm just having an emotional experience sitting with that at the moment.

Christian, you taught a class as I understand it, called Suffering. And you compiled an anthology of poems on joy. And in the process, you realize four ways that joy and suffering are alike. And we have them here. If you don't mind if I read them from your work, you talked about the way that joy and suffering are alike is, one, they're never abstract. Two, they are inevitable. And you said, "I don't believe any life is entirely devoid of joy."

Three, they cannot be willed or instrumentalized. And you say, "Thus, I'm excluding any pain that is initiated to serve an end." Four, there is something sacred in them, or at least there can be. How did these four very beautiful and profound realizations become real for you?

Christian Wiman: Well, they became real for me. It's just in the way that I was saying that poetry for me is the intrusion of wonder or awe. And prose is the ex post facto understanding of it. I think life is, in this instance, life happened to me, and I experienced what I'm writing there a moment of joy in the midst of great suffering, and that was the occasion of My Bride Abyss. That's what led me to write that book, My Bride Abyss. That was meeting my wife really and returning to being able to write poetry even as I had been diagnosed with this cancer. And so they became real to me in the living out of that experience. All the ways that I did that in my life, and of course all the things that I wrote, it has all been an attempt to understand that event in my life.

Paul Swanson: I love how that squares with so much of what we might call the Christian mystical tradition where there's that vertical incision of joy or suffering, or wonder, how that breaks open. And then we spend the rest of our lives trying to unpack, or it's the writing of a poem, and then the prose follows as a way to try to make sense of these experiences.

Do you find yourself returning to those mystics who write in that way? I think particularly of St. John of the Cross with The Dark Knight of the Soul. Do you see the way that you're distilling some of this... Whether it's through your poetry or this beautiful list of four ways that suffering and joy can both show up. And do you find yourself naming yourself in that tradition of mystical writers?

Maybe, you wouldn't use that word mystic, but just as predecessors to the genre that you write in. Not to go too long, I even think about Jesus and some of the... He tells these stories. And then he sometimes has to extrapolate the meaning to those who are like, "I don't get it. I don't get it." But the primary thing he does is he tells little parables or he's got his speeches that he gives, and then has to unpack them further.

Christian Wiman: Well, yeah. I've certainly been very influenced and affected by certain mystical writers. Simone Weil seems to me a mystical writer, and she had an experience, mystical experience that I think she's spent the rest of her life trying to understand.

Yes, I do feel a great kinship with a lot of those writers. I myself have never had a transformative experience like that. I've felt reality incredibly lit and charged with what I was sure was Christ at a specific period in my life and for a specific number of days. And that experience does live in me, but it was never like Teresa of Ávila levitating above the ground or something like that. I do think that a lot of what faith is, as Abraham Heschel said, faithfulness to the times when we had faith, it's if you have some experience, whatever it is, it's very easy to let the days begin to muffle that.

And so you come to think that maybe it wasn't true. Maybe, I was just suffering so badly that my mind ginned this up to protect itself. But it can be much smaller things too. It can be a moment of that small moth there at the kitchen table. And a month goes by, and you've got no small moths in the mornings. And you think, "Was there ever a moment when reality seemed to open up?"

And I think that, in some way, we have to think of faith as remaining faithful to the times when we had faith. It doesn't mean it's all retroactive because the only way that joy can only happen to a person that is enabled to experience joy, that allows himself or herself to feel joy. And so if you're girded against the world, like I was saying, you're bristled up against it, there's no way you can be in a state receptive to joy. I think for me, a life of faith is, I resonate quite a bit with the mystics, as you say, but also with Heschel's idea of how you live after an experience of God.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Yeah. I remember reading years ago just this question of what did Paul McCartney do after he wrote Yesterday? What did Bob Dylan do after he wrote Don't Think Twice? These inbreakings of these amazing songs that come, but then you go and you make lunch, and you have a fight with your partner.

Life continues in very mundane ways, even after these amazing, whether it's an inbreaking of spirit or poetry or reality in a way that illuminates the rest of your life, the faithfulness to what occurred and remembrance of that. I think that is such a deep kind of faith that we don't honor enough in this way that these moments break out and light up the rest of our life.

Christian Wiman: Yeah. That's one reason I don't understand always the sort of determined secularism of so many poets that I know because they have these experiences. And everybody says, "It seems to come from somewhere else. It seems like I'm not there. I'm just something speaking through me."

But then they seem to mean nothing in the life. They don't translate into anything. They

don't demand anything. And for me, I just could not understand where these experiences were coming from, how it happened without God. Psychology did not do it.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting. I'm thinking about, we've done episodes with Paula D'Arcy and Mirabai Starr who've both talked about in very intense stories in different ways of the loss of a child and the intensity of that grieving process and, in both, talked about the surprising breakthroughs of joy in the midst of grief, so much so that a lot of times when people are in these harrowing experiences as you're discussing so eloquently, there is this almost reluctance, for some folks, almost a guilt in feeling joy in the midst of tragedy, particularly when you're bereaved at the loss of another person.

And yet, these breakthroughs are so real and so profound, and so just received, not made happen. And I've landed on the fact that as a person of faith, for me, I receive them as a gift from the divine. I know other folks process them in different ways. I had love both of your thoughts on this. Is there a gifted quality to that? How do we stand in receptivity to the joy that seems to defy the circumstance that we're in the moment and doesn't make that circumstance go away?

Christian Wiman: Yeah. I think consciousness is the only way to do it, that you have to remain, in some way, conscious, have to think of yourself as a conscious being and protect that. And I think every bit of reality seems to be aligned against that. It's as if this blob is always trying to swallow us to take us into it.

And just think of your days as they are, the amount of crap that gets just wind-blasted towards you. Off the internet, all the stuff that you take in during a day and the debased level of so much of that. And I think we live in a time when it is very difficult to forge and retain and refine individual consciousness. And that's what I think has to be done if you're going to make sense of and make a life out of and make a faith out of those moments of joy and suffering in your life.

So for me, it really is a constant discipline of attending to God, attending to the world, and seeing where I find God in that. And it also means for me, going to church, doing these things that... I've never been at all comfortable in church. I've always been bored out of my mind except for one experience, which I write about in *My Bright Abyss*. But it still seems to be important to me. And I'm right now going to a Catholic Church, a Black Catholic Church, and it seems to be a necessary thing for me and my wife to do. And so we do it quite every single Sunday.

Mike Petrow: One last rambling question for me. I'm going to try to make this make sense. I so appreciate everything you've just said. We usually end a lot of our episodes talk about *Falling Upwards*, and we say that Richard's written this book about *Two Halves of Life*. And we read this book, and we read about the wisdom of the first half of the life, and we read about the wisdom of the second half of the life.

And then once we've done that, we are now trying to hold the two, and we're trying to live both in the same time. I'd like to take this a little bit deeper and reflecting back on the season so far. So many of the folks that we've interviewed had shared a hinge moment where something happened. And for a lot of folks, something happened very early in their journey



that initiated them into a different way of being in a different way of thinking.

There's a tragedy. There's a loss. There's a difficulty. I've experienced it. You've experienced it, Christian, you've experienced it to so much of a greater degree. And we're never the same after that. And yet, life goes on. There's still taxes and garbage to be taken out, and life's to do, and papers to grade, and so on and so forth.

And so I'm thinking about everything you've just said, and I'm thinking about what you literally just said. I'm thinking about how so many of the early Christian contemplatives talked about the importance of remembrance and awareness. Richard talks about contemplation as a long loving look at the real, but it's this invitation to see what we would otherwise very quickly forget.

And so I think my question, Christian, if you'd be willing to just answer this however it feels right, is how then do you go on different and carrying that and making that real in the ordinary mundane realities of day-to-day life? And say it another way, do you remember the person that you were when you were 35 before this journey? Is that person very different from the person you are now? How do you relate to that person, and how do you live those realities all at the same time? Does that question make any sense? And it's fine if it doesn't.

Christian Wiman: Yeah. It makes perfect sense. My answer is similar to the one I just gave though. I have an obvious rupture in my life, right at that time, 36, I guess, and whenever it was. And when I met my wife and was able to write for the first time in years and diagnosed with cancer, all these three things happened at basically the same time.

And the person that I was, was a maniacally driven, maniacally ambitious, not ambitious for fame, exactly. Of course, I wanted it like everyone. Every literary person, they say they don't, but they do. But I was ambitious for, I wanted to write something great, and I thought I would know when I wrote something great that it will happen. And the person I am now doesn't believe that you will ever know if you've written something great, and that even the best things that you have written over time begin to seem quite a bit smaller to you and that you will never stand in one solid place and be able to say, "This is what life means. This is what I believe. This is who I am." All of these things are in flux forever.

And what the best you can do is to come to some sort of active peace with that and to act in ways that honor who you were when you had that faith, when you had during that moment, that time of faith. And I'm very aware of doing that. I'm not very aware of being successful at it, but I'm very aware of trying to do it. And whether that means simply being entirely present and conscious when I'm having a one-on-one with a student, something like that. Whereas before, I might have rushed along or been conscious of other things or focused everything on literature rather than taking them in as a whole person. So that's changed, and I hope that it's changed in the ways that I relate to my family, my kids, the way I go through my days.

Paul Swanson: That's lovely. That sense of evolution and leaning into the... and the unfinishedness of life, of celebrating the presence of life holistically from what you were saying before, I think we can all relate to the ways in which we can separate ourselves into different pieces and can strive for things that are beyond a sense of wholeness.

And to hear your story and hear the way that you are living this deep end, and you have this great line about reality's conjunction is always and, and it seems like you keep including more and more things as you journey deeper and deeper into the love of this life of what's happening right now with your work that is yours to do and the fidelity to that, but also to your family and to your students and to your kids.

I want to ask as a way to wrap that up of how do you seek to pass that on? As you've evolved and live with this and have transformed on this unfinished journey, how do you try to pass that on to those who are looking to you as a parent, a partner, or a professor?

Christian Wiman: Well, there's the work in which that's the best I can do in terms of making a trace of my own mind. But then, otherwise, it's just in those actions like I just said. I'm very conscious of how many students I have that are in these difficult places in their lives. They're often in their 20s, and they're casting about and wrestling with faith. And, yeah, someone older can have a huge impression on someone that age. I know they did on my life.

And so I'm very conscious of what I say to them and trying to guide them in some way that's toward God as I understand it. And, of course, my kids, you can't make kids believe anything at all.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Christian Wiman: My kids are freewheeling independent people, but I am very conscious of trying to teach them love. That's the best that I can do. And I was lucky in that way because I had a really bad childhood, but my mother really loved us. And part of what I've come to realize is that if you have that, man, you can deal with anything. If you have that, that is like an anchor. And as messed up as my childhood was, there was that. So I'm just very conscious of that one thing, being as clear and sustaining as I can make it.

Mike Petrow: That's a good one thing to go out on.

Paul Swanson: That's a good one to end on.

Mike Petrow: Christian, this has been such a rich conversation. I have learned a bunch. I cannot wait to go back and re-listen to it quite a few times. Thank you so much.

Christian Wiman: I enjoyed it, guys. You guys were great.

Paul Swanson: Mike, it was so fun to be in conversation with Christian Wiman. I've been such a fan of his work from *My Bright Abyss* all the way up to his latest work. He just brings such a poetic lens to an examined life, to a deep, meaningful life and also just the day-to-day realities. And on that particular day, we were in the midst of a classic Albuquerque windstorm.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh. Yeah. It's so funny to expand the perspective a bit. We were literally recording this conversation. I love that you referred to it as fun because it was, and it was intense, and it was deep, and it was mind-blowing. And what our listeners would know is while we were recording, there was one of the most intense windstorms I've lived through here. There were things crashing into the side of the building. At one point, I thought a plane was going to crash on top of us. It was just train was going by, and it was just howling winds shaking



the studio here. And that perfectly contextualized the sort of bone-rattling depth that that conversation took us through. Wow.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Yeah. There's Christian Wiman story itself about living with this brutal cancer and the way in which he's continued to raise a family, be in a marriage, be a teacher, be a poet, and not allow suffering to overtake the entirety of his life, but to really face it and look for ways to see all the angles that one can approach it.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I was really taken by his comments about the difference between happiness and joy.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And looking back, we've heard some really heavy stories this season, and we've heard a lot of folks talk about some really intense loss and some really intense grief. And what has been moving to me has also been the moments of breakthroughs of joy in the midst of that and the paradox of holding the tension of those two things at the same time.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I love that list he has. I'll just read real quick of how joy and suffering are connected, how they're never abstract. They're inevitable. They cannot be willed or instrumentalized. There is something sacred in them, or at least there can be.

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious. Well, and even to hear him at the top of the episode, we asked, "How are you doing? How's your health?"

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And he said, "I didn't think I was going to be alive at this point." And that notion of coming through this harrowing health crisis and then going back to ordinary life and having to worry about the ordinary tasks and stressors, and it really, really struck me, the paradox that we sometimes find ourselves in of holding the extraordinary and the ordinary at the same time, not just the joy and the sorrow, but the mundane and the insane.

Paul Swanson: The mundane and the insane, I like that. I feel like that teases up for a question to consider for our audience. You want to bring that question forth? You have such a way with the paradoxical language.

Mike Petrow: Sure. I think a contemplative prompt that we could all sit with is exactly that. What are the paradoxes I'm being asked to hold right now? What's the ordinary and the extraordinary that are asking to coexist in me? And what is that asking me to stretch into?

Corey Wayne: Thanks for listening to this podcast by the Center for Action and Contemplation, an educational nonprofit that introduces seekers to the contemplative Christian path of transformation. To learn more about our work, visit us at [cac.org](http://cac.org). Everything Belongs is made possible, thanks to the generosity of our supporters and the shared work of-

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Sara Palmer: Sara Palmer.

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.