



EVERYTHING BELONGS

New Problems and New Directions
with Dr. Barbara Holmes and Brian McLaren

Paul Swanson: The following poem, *The Real Work*, by Wendell Berry, is mentioned in the latter half of this episode. It goes like this. “It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

Perhaps you have met your real work and you have come to a place of unknowing, a shift in vocation, a challenge that calls to you or a mysterious fluttering that has not yet articulated itself. Father Richard speaks of this unfolding into the second half of life as working with life’s imperfections, its tragic sense. Learning to love reality from new depths as you see out from a contemplative mind. In today’s conversation, we join Richard at his hermitage, *The Sleepy Ope*, and discuss chapter 12, *New Problems and New Directions*. We ask Richard about the possibilities and limitations of institutions, relationships that endure alongside the anchor of solitude and engaging in the work that matters.

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: Well, Richard and Ope, thank you for having us back into your hermitage to talk about chapter 12, *New Problems and New Directions* from *Falling Upward*. And we want to begin with the way that you begin the book where you talk about ego needs and soul needs, and one thing that you pinpoint is how institutions tend to focus on ego needs for the safety of their own existence, while the soul is concerned with larger questions. So although that might be true for institutions, it’s also true for individuals as well.

Richard Rohr: Yes. That’s right.

Paul Swanson: It’s not just institutions.

Richard Rohr: That’s right.

Paul Swanson: Do you have any examples that come to mind, to start off really practically, of someone attending to the needs of the first half of life while also creating space for the second? So while attending to the ego needs, but also creating space, and then also the inverse of someone in the second half of life releasing their needs and identities of the first half for the expansion of the second.

Richard Rohr: What first comes to mind is all the people we both know who, although they’re just building their identity, are already making time for retreat days, forest bathing, are doing things that are impractical, not building toward a concrete goal but opening the field. I think we used to call them days of recollection, just one word, but a day where we changed the rules. In the seminary they were totally quiet, and they were good, I remember looking forward to them. You didn’t have to study, you didn’t have to perform. So in the attempt to create an alternative to the normal goals of achievement and performance is a first half of life person beginning to operate like a second half of life.

Paul Swanson: So as the necessity of attending to the duties of life, making enough space where there are these little pockets of leisure or rest or death.

Richard Rohr: Very good. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: And how about the inverse? How about those who are in the second half?

Richard Rohr: By the way, just to throw in, that's what the Jewish Sabbath was, saying one-seventh of life should be non-performance. It's brilliant. It became legalized like all religions do, but the core idea's right on, so we all need Sabbath time, non-performance time.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I mean, you look at so much of American culture and how our leisure time should be productive.

Richard Rohr: Still.

Paul Swanson: And that it can't just be the sense of timelessness and eternity in it.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Paul Swanson: But before we do jump and move on, I'm curious for those in the second half of life, how do you see them releasing the needs and identities of the first half of life to or even attending them to keep them going a little bit, but that's no longer the focus? Do you have any practical examples or sense of guidance for those in that space?

Richard Rohr: These beautiful people who show up in anything growth-oriented, where does that come from except this yearning to get out of the instrumental into the creative where instead of I working for my own goals, I let myself be worked upon. That always astounds me how these people show up. In honesty, they're often women in their 50s. They just fill up groups such as they know there's more to life than being a mother, than being a wife. Maybe because that was made so pedestrian or something, I don't know. I can't imagine being a mother is pedestrian, but women certainly recognize the need to go deeper, quicker, and earlier than men do. Men put it off as long as possible. In fact, they often consider it women's work, which is to go back to my constant theme of initiation. That's why men need initiation. They need to be told there's an inner world that's more important than the outer world. They need to be deliberately taught that. Women, they seem to know it.

Paul Swanson: Do you think that part of that is the rewards of the inner world are not immediate? I think about-

Richard Rohr: That's good.

Paul Swanson: ... the outer world, the performative worlds, you win a race, you get a medal.

Richard Rohr: Right away.

Paul Swanson: You get the big clients, you get the raise. But the inner world, I feel like it's like a slow compounding of what does practice look like over 20 years? What does commitment and fidelity to another person look like over 10 years? The fruits of that are not quite so explicit.

Richard Rohr: Yes, I can't improve on what you just said. That's it.

Mike Petrow: Listening to you talk about people who are committed to self-transformation, who fill up these events, I can't help but wonder if some of us who go to these events, in addition to wanting to learn and grow, are sometimes also just looking for other people like us who are on the path.

Richard Rohr: That's good.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Jung says if we're willing to live our life truly and uniquely and we're willing to follow our personal quest all the places it takes us that we have to be prepared to be lonely. And if you learn what others maybe are not necessarily excited to learn or you go places not everyone wants to go, I think you do feel alone. You talk about this in the chapter, Richard. You say, "Like Jesus, you may soon feel you have nowhere to lay your head even while a new set of heads are slowly making sense to you."

And I know this is a very Enneagram Four question, Richard, but you have a section in this chapter on loneliness and solitude. And you talk about exactly this, how poets and prophets the world over have described this state where because of the journey that we're on, because of the work that we've done, we can move in and out of many spaces, but we're not really at home in any of them. And I feel like there's a liminality to this, right? We become this sort of tribe of wandering exiles. So here's this thing. We're living in the first and the second half of life at the same time in some ways.

Richard Rohr: Yes, that's true.

Mike Petrow: We're living in deconstruction and reconstruction.

Richard Rohr: A lot of people don't though.

Mike Petrow: Okay.

Richard Rohr: They remain ensconced in all the questions and answers of the first.

Mike Petrow: So if we make it to this place where we're living in disorder and reorder, I feel like sometimes there's a space of like I'm both a Christian and not a Christian. I am a God-believing spiritual atheist. I live in the cloud of unknowing in which myth and symbol and image is stripped away, but I'm also surrounded by a cloud of witnesses where saints and angels and ancestors are speaking, and I land in what you say here. This is what I really want to ask you about. You say, "A kind of double belonging is characteristic to people at this stage. No one group meets all their needs, desires, and visions." And you say, Richard, I'll bet if you've lasted this long with this book or this podcast even, or God help you, this question, you yourself are probably a double-belonger, maybe even a triple or more. So here's my question, Richard, what advice-

Richard Rohr: Oh, thank you. You're bringing so much back.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. What advice do you give? I mean, I'm guessing you've probably lived here most of your life. What advice do you give for those of us who carry that loneliness

of being in all these spaces but being fully contained by none of them? Does that question make sense?

Paul Swanson: It certainly does.

Richard Rohr: It really does. Yeah. I mean, the given was I was always a Franciscan, and yet every period of my life, if I would be honest, there were groups that I met or encountered or read about or visited who temporarily inspired me more than my own community. Yeah.

Mike Petrow: It makes me think about people who tell the stories of how there are different mystics and teachers who are so deeply rooted in their own faith tradition, but sometimes when a Buddhist contemplative and a Christian contemplative get together, they have more in common with each other than they might with... Is something like that?

Richard Rohr: It's exactly like that. And for the freedom to entertain the wisdom of both is a great freedom. It doesn't negate your commitment to your first belonging, although initial people will think so. I remember when I didn't wear my habit as much as some Franciscans, they chided me, "Richard, you never wear your habit." "But I do," I said, "but just not as much." That's all. And for me, and that's all I can say, for me that was necessary to loosen my belonging. I mean, every time you men talk to another woman than your wife or your girlfriend, you're really not, hopefully, being disloyal to her. You're discovering the art of the eternal feminine. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: There's something in here too, but it's not putting all your eggs in one basket.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: You're finding wisdom in multiple places and relationality and depth. I think about I take my marriage, if I were to think my wife has to hold all of my answers or that even that old cliché from Jerry McGuire of like, you complete me. That's too much to put onto her or for me to...

Richard Rohr: You complete me. Stay here, complete me.

Paul Swanson: That's right. And to allow the fullness of what do the Buddhist teachers and the Hindu sages beyond my own Christian mystical tradition have to offer me that I can't get anywhere else? It doesn't mean I have to drop my Christian cloak to try to don other-

Mike Petrow: Well, and that's interesting, Paul, because it leads me to think about even for those of us who are sort of moving beyond gender binaries, there's a deliberation between for a man suddenly every woman is not, nor should she have ever been a potential partner, romantic conquest, so on and so forth. Every person is a person, every connection is a connection. And I wonder if, while we hold on to the rich depth of our unique religious traditions and orders and institutions, the fluidity of conversation between them now is creating more possibilities of understanding what it means to be a spiritual or contemplative person in the world.

Richard Rohr: I think so, yeah. People have greater freedom to do that in our lifetime than probably ever before. Yeah, and not just around gender issues, but issues of interest or vocation. You have the freedom to inhabit different camps for a while. Yeah. That's good.

Mike Petrow: To bring the Enneagram into it, so you're an Enneagram Nine, Paul, and the stereotype around the Enneagram Nines is that you have the ability to relate and connect and make peace and fit into a lot of different containers and situations. I'm an Enneagram Four, and the silly bias is that the Four feels at home and fits in fully nowhere, but there's a fluidity in that as well. And this dynamism, if we talk to Richard about his secret Enneagram Four identity, the dynamism of fitting in and not fitting in, it brings me back again to this notion of the beauty of the many opportunities of connection and the burden of loneliness. Richard, you've moved in so many circles and you've connected with so many people, famous people, ordinary people. You've been a prison chaplain, you've been on Oprah. Have you carried loneliness in your journey as you've moved in and out of all these different spaces?

Richard Rohr: Obviously. You can't choose celibacy and not most days of your life realize you're radically alone, but the training wasn't really not having sex. It was how to find satisfaction and fulfillment in being alone, and that I think I developed early. I know there's a danger to that where you don't like people bothering you, and I've seen that in myself and not liked it, where you get so used to your aloneness. But I can remember feeling an immense freedom that I have no one to please this afternoon except you, God, no one, no one to live up to their chatter needs or friendship needs. That's not the only agenda, but it's a good agenda now and then. I see it especially in relationship to people who confuse codependency with love, love with codependency. There's an awful lot of people seem to think that codependency is love.

Mike Petrow: How would you explain the difference between codependency and love, Richard, for you?

Richard Rohr: Codependency is need love, true love is gift love. It's not I need you. You might use those words.

Mike Petrow: Sure.

Richard Rohr: But what you really want is another person to give to and to receive from. It's a different kind of energy, because when it's taken away, you don't panic. You enjoyed it, you loved it even, but you could live without it.

Mike Petrow: I wonder if for those of us who were not gifted the opportunity to grow up with a childhood that taught us what gift love was and the only thing we've known is need love, if there's a real benefit in going through that process of being alone.

Richard Rohr: That's excellent, yeah.

Mike Petrow: To unlearn bad love so that we can then learn what it is to receive.

Richard Rohr: A lot of people cannot even imagine loving something, someone if they don't utterly need them in the full-blown sense of that. I don't think you need them. You enjoy them, you value them. You enjoy focusing upon them for their own sake. Really I think I could say I

feel that for you three coming here and invading my life so cruelly.

Mike Petrow: As we do interrupt your house.

Richard Rohr: How many months you've been doing this, but I easily look forward to it, because you're so easy to be with. It's not need love, it's gift love. I accept your gift, and I hope you allow me to give. Yeah, it's good.

Paul Swanson: It does feel like solitude is connected to that, solitude and loneliness, where if you're in a place of the depths of solitude where you don't need this gift love relationally, it can show up as abundance.

Richard Rohr: Oh, okay.

Paul Swanson: Does that make sense where I'm going?

Richard Rohr: It does. It does.

Paul Swanson: And I think we all experience times of loneliness, but it comes from, I think, our own human ache for other, for connection.

Richard Rohr: That's beautiful.

Paul Swanson: What you were saying, it reminds me of the essayist Donald Hall, who's written a lot about loneliness and solitude, and one of the things he talks about is that night. He calls it the soft power of solitude recedes, and then loneliness creeps in. And I think that there's something about our desire for deep connection. We feel most alone as the day has worn off. And if we aren't sharing that out of a place of solitude, we can't help but feel lonely. At least I feel that for myself. Even though I'm in a loving, beautiful marriage, there's still times of loneliness.

Richard Rohr: Sure.

Mike Petrow: Yeah These moments where we record these podcasts and I'm sitting here fighting tears, because I realize I'm learning something brand new. I've never previously considered loneliness as the deconstruction of unhealthy patterns of love, but you have me thinking about it right now. And I wonder if there's that some part of loneliness-

Richard Rohr: In part. Not the whole meaning, but it's a partial meaning, yes.

Mike Petrow: But it's in contrast with a different type as well, which is the longing of the heart and then the pull maybe towards solitude, towards being alone. Would you say more about it just being in part, Richard?

Richard Rohr: When you know have enough not to need more, then you have both. It's non-addictive behavior. True love cannot be addictive. It's enjoyable. It might feel like it is, but it's always got to come from the realm of freedom and choice, not obligation and duty. And we Christians got so used to living our entire lives out of obligation to duty we almost didn't know how to operate if there wasn't a duty to do it, just do it.

Mike Petrow: That's-

Richard Rohr: You have to learn that, I think.

Mike Petrow: Well, that's really helpful and powerful for me, because I think about that idea of having enough to appreciate and not needing more. I think about even mystical experiences, peak experiences, big religious experiences, big moments of beauty that I've had, and you're challenging me to ponder. If my response is immediately, how do I recreate that and have that again, then I've not fully received the gift of what it is.

Richard Rohr: That would be much of my point, yeah.

Mike Petrow: That's really helpful.

Paul Swanson: And you two might know this better than I do, isn't it Rilke who says something about love is protecting the solitude of the beloved?

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah.

Paul Swanson: And so there's a protection of support of one's own journey so that the gift of love can be a free exchange and not that clingy neediness that is so easy to tip into if we get triggered in that way.

Richard Rohr: So easy. And then, believe it or not, you stop appreciating it, because you're fighting the game of deserve and right and obligation and duty, she owes me, he owes me. It's over then. It's not a dance. It's a strut.

Paul Swanson: I have experienced that at different cycles of my marriage, where I feel an entitlement, and that to me is the bell of recognition that something is askew, because why do I think I deserve this?

Richard Rohr: It's so wonderful, wonderful how mature you are for a young man.

Paul Swanson: Well, some days.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: But gosh, there's so much here, and I'm hesitant to shift the conversation, because I think there's been such a million of depth here.

Richard Rohr: Oh, it says a lot about you too.

Mike Petrow: Well, so when you talk about protecting the solitude of another, being alone together, fully engaging the gift without needing more, one of the things I hear threaded through this is this notion of the both-and, of appreciating something and then not needing to hang onto it. Richard, you say this in the chapter, "What this illustrates, of course, is a newly discovered capacity for what many religions have called non-dualistic thinking or both-and thinking. It's almost the benchmark of our growth in the second half of life. More calm and contemplative seeing does not appear suddenly, but grows almost unconsciously over many years of conflict, confusion, healing, broadening, loving, and forgiving reality." So here's a wild card. I've been around the conversation around non-dualistic Christianity for years. What I am considering more deeply in this conversation than ever before is that the idea

of both-and and non-dualistic thinking is a way of loving and loving reality. Is there any credence to that at all?

Richard Rohr: Of course, it's right. Some call... We don't use the term non-dual monism, that to see the oneness of things, you have to temporarily see two aspects and then you overcome it. It's this like those beautiful fall leaves outside our window here. They're still half green, they're half yellow, they're both, and that's what creates their beauty. Their oneness is now a new kind of oneness. That's getting too abstract.

Mike Petrow: But I like that, because I'm fascinated with Origen's notion of the apokatastasis, the idea of the universal restoration, that God's bringing all things together. But one of the things he says is that when God brings everything together in unity, it does not erase our individuality. It does not erase particularity. It doesn't erase your unique beauty. It doesn't erase your unique beauty.

Richard Rohr: Origen already said that.

Mike Petrow: He did a long time ago.

Richard Rohr: What an amazing man.

Mike Petrow: He's pretty good.

Richard Rohr: 2,000 years ahead of time.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. But this is what I love, Richard, when you talk about how unity is not uniformity, non-duality is not erasure. It leaves us our particularity and somehow brings us together. Does that make sense?

Richard Rohr: Of course it does. I just keep wanting to say it in different ways, but they all seem so abstract.

Mike Petrow: Oh, it's-

Richard Rohr: Those trees that I looked out at for months, how they're beautifully green are every day less green and the same leaves, and yet they now exhibit an utterly new kind of beauty. Which was the true beauty, the green or the yellow? I don't know, and it doesn't even matter. Thank you. I don't know what I'm saying.

Mike Petrow: No, no.

Richard Rohr: But it leads to universal appreciation, non-dual thinking.

Paul Swanson: And I think in person-to-person relationships or human-to-animal, you always allow the other to show up as they are without expectation.

Richard Rohr: As it is.

Paul Swanson: So that you can appreciate the beauty of what's occurring in this moment, whether it's the yellow leaves or the green leaves Ope running around or Ope on your lap. You're not having

that expectation that it's got to be a prescribed way.

Richard Rohr: One or the other.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. You're good hearers, both of you. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: What'd you say? I'm just kidding. That's a dumb joke.

Richard Rohr: Minnesota humor, which isn't very humorous.

Paul Swanson: Stay local. We'll keep that north of the-

Mike Petrow: And I think this is what I love about your teaching on the universal Christ, Richard, is that Christ is not that which flattens everything out. It's that which brightens the uniqueness and colors of everything, right? Non-duality as much as its unity is infinite diversity forever.

Richard Rohr: I don't have anything to teach you. You get it already. You get it. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: I'm going to reflect on what you just said about the leaves. I ran yesterday morning along the Bosque and the sun was coming down and there's 10,000 different colors of leaves.

Richard Rohr: Forest bathing.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, no leave is the same, and yet it's all beauty.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: This was such a rich time. I feel like we've covered so much ground of the depth of beauty and the breadth of it that I think we can just end this conversation with the abundance of wonder that we are, I think, grasping for words for, which is the space that I love to be in. So thank you, Richard.

Mike Petrow: Amen.

Richard Rohr: And in the midst of it, Ope jumped on my lap almost as if to say, "I want in on this. I want to enjoy this just by being here."

Mike Petrow: He is. He's making eye contact with all of us.

Richard Rohr: With all of us.

Mike Petrow: Looking around, participating.

Richard Rohr: All creation. Thank you. Thank you. You're good men.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Ope.

Mike Petrow: This has been rich. Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Today we're joined by two faculty members of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Dr. Barbara Holmes and Brian McLaren. Dr. Barbara Holmes is a spiritual teacher, activist, and scholar focused on African American spirituality, mysticism, cosmology, and culture. She's president emerita of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and also served as vice president of academic affairs and dean of Memphis Theological Seminary. She's the author of several books, including *Joy Unspeakable*, *Race and the Cosmos*, and most recently, *Walking With Our Ancestors: Contemplation and Activism*. She co-hosts the podcast, *The Cosmic We* on the CAC's podcast network. Brian McLaren is the dean of CAC faculty. As a former evangelical pastor, Brian is a champion for a more loving, inclusive, and contemplative Christianity. As faculty member at the Center for Action and Contemplation, Brian teaches ways to reconnect with the message Jesus lived and died for, unconditional love. He's the author of several books, including *Faith After Doubt*, *the Great Spiritual Migration*, and most recently, *Life After Doom*, he hosts the podcast *Learning How to See* on the CAC's podcast network.

Well, welcome, Dr. B and Brian, it's such a joy and privilege to be in conversation with you at any point, but especially here on *Everything Belongs*. And we want to kick off with our first question at a very concrete place as we think about these themes of the two halves of life and particularly the themes of chapter 12, *New Problems and New Directions*. Now, as teachers and professionals who have moved through various roles throughout your careers and lives, you've moved through various institutions, sometimes even running them, in my estimation, neither one of you are seeking to be running the institution or be mired in the mechanics of that today. What word of counsel might you offer those who are still living an institutional life that are seeking to honor the needs of the first half of life while simultaneously creating space and time and visioning and grace for the second half of life?

Barbara Holmes: I believe that there's a time and a season for everything, and there was no question in my mind that I was called to lead theological institutions even when I was just studying to be a professor. There was something about the combination of my being an attorney and a teacher that made me want to get deeper into the foundational mix of what makes theological education work. I didn't just want to teach it, I wanted to know why it worked, how it could work better, and I was stuck on the word seed-beds. Seminaries are seed-beds. That's what we used to think of them as, and I don't think that's true anymore. And I wanted to know how to return it to that space where people had the opportunity to grow in their own ways, toward their own light, and to work within institutions as well as developing their own spiritual depth, because I think you're called to the depths, whether you're in institutions or not.

You can be running a church, but your needs for solitude, wilderness, for peace, for communing with nature, cannot be suppressed by your daily computer work and scheduling. That's not going to go away. You're going to have to find time for it. And eventually what you find is that the second half of life, it takes over, thank God. That desire to just be. I'm still fascinated by Father Richard's talk about gazing, because that so succinctly describes what the second half of life is about. It can be embarrassing when you're in the middle of a question and answer, someone's talking to you, and in the middle of it you start gazing. And by the time they asked the question, you don't know what they were talking about anymore. And then because of your age, you have to act like you knew, because otherwise you're deemed to be senile. So this gazing thing has two sides to it, but I'm enjoying it more than

I can even say with words, that time in institutions was important. The time to leave was important, and to be able to discern when, what, and where is the key to everything.

Paul Swanson: Thank you for that, Dr. B.

Brian McLaren: So beautifully said. Yeah, so beautifully said. I don't think I can add anything to that, but maybe take a little different tack and say that the way we talk about institutions, especially these days, we often make it sound like they're a problem. And the fact is we depend on institutions. All the ones that are working well, we take for granted because they're working so well. And there are people who are working to keep them working well. Oh, my goodness, I was hiking in the mountains just a couple days ago and came upon a place where a stream had a little bend in the stream, and that bend in the stream was expanding. And there was a huge ponderosa pine that had been growing at the edge of the stream, and now the soil was all being eroded, half of the roots were hanging out over empty air. That tree didn't do anything wrong. That tree grew for 70 or 80 years, by the size of it. But the times changed. And now that tree will hold on as long as it can, and someday it will fall.

And it won't be a failure, it will be a success that it held on as long as it did. And I think institutions are like that. When they go well, we take them for granted. So I would say to everybody who's leading an institution, your work is super important. And then I'd say to those of us who are very critical of institutions, don't make a mistake of thinking the institution is a problem. I think there are two closely related problems. One is institutionalism. That's when we act... I like the saying that the ism is when we act like the thing is the only thing there ism.

Barbara Holmes: I like that.

Brian McLaren: In other words, when you act like that your institution is the only thing that counts, it's the only thing that matters. No, it's not the institution that matters, it's the mission of the institution that matters. And when an institution forgets that it's mission is what matters, and it acts like keeping all the employees is what matters, keeping up the image of the organizations. No, it's the mission that matters. So institutionalism is a problem, and if you're leading an institution, you have to fight institutionalism constantly. That's part of your job as a leader.

And then the other thing is there are bad institutions. There are institutions that have missions that make the world a worse place. A lot of them happen to be political, a lot of them happen to be economic, and a lot of them happen to be religious. They make their religion better by making the world a worse place. They prosper their religion. So what I would say is we need all the good people leading good institutions that we possibly can, and that's work of the first half of life that all of us in the second half of life can contribute to and help just offer gaze at institutions, as Dr. B was saying, and have a perspective on what's going on with them.

Barbara Holmes: I think my understanding of institutions changed after I became deeply immersed in the work of Walter Wink.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: Because suddenly it didn't seem as if there was anything to blame. What he speaks of is the spiritual interiority of every institution. And it reminds us that Jesus in the book of Revelation speaks to the institution, doesn't call the deacons together, doesn't call the preaching staff together. He says, "This I have against you." And it is that the angel of an institution attempts to hold stasis, good or bad. And so you can change the congregation, fire a pastor, do all that, and you'll still have the same malignancies inside simply because the angel has not been addressed with the specificity and power that is within all of us who are both human and divine. You have to call the angel back to its task.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Dr. B, I'm so glad you mentioned that. I was a pastor for 24 years, and when I read Walter Wink, maybe halfway through that process, I felt like I understood. A way to say it is he refers to that passage in Revelation about the angel of the church being kind of the spirit of the church or the corporate persona of the church, the culture or soul of the corporation, so to speak. And I have to look and say there were periods of time when the soul of the church that I led was really healthy and there were other periods of time when the soul was unwell, and there could be any number of causes for both, some of them having to do with me, the pastor, some of them having to do with other elements.

I think that might be something else that could help leaders of institutions to say, understand your institution is redeemable, even if its soul is currently sick, or it may be redeemable, but it requires us... So often what I did is instead of saying the institution's soul isn't well, I would find a person to blame, and that's how scapegoating often works. So yeah, that's one of the art forms, I think, of leadership.

Barbara Holmes: I still haven't gotten to the end of his formula where he says the systems are fallen and the systems are broken, and that final thing, the systems can be redeemed. As I look at some of these systems, I was like, "Where are you getting this from?" I mean, maybe Christ can call them back to their original purpose. I certainly can't. They're doing great harm in the world. How is it that they are redeemed? And then you have to just come to that vast leap that through Christ all things are redeemed through a divine spirit that seeks good, is good, nurtures good, that nothing can be totally irredeemable.

Paul Swanson: Well said. Yeah, I think those nuances are so important, and the way that as you each responded and respond together, it kept shedding layers and illuminating more ways to look at institutional life in the first half, second half, but also just some of the complexity that resides in the spirits that embody place and people and how do we seek redemption in all the ways that we can be healing agents in the world?

Mike Petrow: I so appreciate that. And if we shift from the institutional to the personal, talking about renewal, as we've shot this, as we've recorded this season of Everything Belongs, and as we've had all these conversations with so many guests and so many listeners have had conversations with us, one of the things that's become really real to me is how easy it is to think of the first half of life as a season of construction when we're building things, and then the second half of life as a season where we're reflecting on those.

And yet so many folks have said to us, "We're still constructing new things in the second half of life." Folks are getting married or remarried, new projects are being born, new visions are being cast, books are being written. Folks are starting second half of life careers. And

yet I still have to wonder, and this is my question, Dr. B and Brian, how second half of life construction, how second half of life goals, and how second half of life new container building feels and looks a little bit different than it did in the first half of life? Does that question make sense?

Barbara Holmes: It does. It's difficult to put boundaries around when something begins and when something ends. When I first read *Falling Upward*, I was thinking in terms of, okay, so you have a first half of life, and the end of that is different for everyone. And then you begin a clean and clear second half, but it's much messier than that. Some of the first half of life drags into the second with you. Not all of it, but some of it. Some if it we're clutching and won't let go of, the ego construction, the identity with things and accumulation and wealth. Some of it we don't want to let go of. Some things just merely shift a bit in the second half, but don't change completely. You have to die to one thing to have something truly new emerge, and we're not willing to let that dying occur, that descent, that path of descent to occur so that you could have complete renewal.

And maybe we're not ever supposed to have such neat endings and connections. Maybe it's just messy. In the beginning we're constructing and we're ego identification and building families, and the second half we're trying to reflect upon what's happened. But maybe some of that reflection begins early on in life. It did for me through visions, dreams, and all kinds of Gullah, incantations, where the second half of life was being brought abruptly into my little young life because elders were transitioning, and as they're going, giving wisdom, and the aunts were sharing that wisdom. So I had to maneuver, how do I become who I think I need to become and still hold this deep wisdom from an elder that I'm far too young to be able to process right now? Very messy process, but one that is creative, I think.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, I so appreciate that. And Brian, I can't wait to hear what you have to say. And I just want to say, Dr. B, I appreciate what you just said there about that breakthrough of deeper wisdom, because I think we so often think of first half of life, the sort of wake up calls that come when something goes off the rails or bad things happen to us, and yet that reminder that dreams speak to us and ancestors are there talking to us. You and I talk often about the crowded cosmos, what you've taught me more than anything else, that there is literally wisdom crying for our attention all around us every moment of every day. And it's not just life's disasters that get our attention. Thank you for that. Thank you for that reminder. Brian, what do you think?

Brian McLaren: A memory came back to mind as Dr. B was speaking. I was about 24 years old, newly married, and my aspiration was to be a college English teacher, and I had a series of part-time jobs at a couple different universities and I was trying to make enough money to keep food on the table, because my wife and I wanted to have some children. And a stranger came into my life, as often happens, he was an older man. I'm guessing he was about the age that I am now. He seemed really, really old. And he said to me, "Brian, I have some advice for you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Your first 10 years on the job, don't worry about money. You don't want to earn money. You just want to earn a reputation. If money comes, let it. Put all your effort into earning a reputation. And if you earn a reputation in the first 10 years of your career, everything you need will come to you after that."

And I remember when he said this to me, I thought, "Nobody has ever said that to me

before. I think I need that advice.” But I’m looking back on it now, and here’s what was in my mind. I really want to succeed so I better build a good reputation. In other words, it was like a technique or a tactic to success. I just couldn’t think in any other way than success. But by the grace of God, I tried to take his advice, and I built a reputation. I worked hard, I was honest, I showed up, I put my whole heart into my work. And he was right. In a sense he was like an emissary from the future, something I wasn’t mature enough to understand who came back to me and spoke in a language I could understand.

If you want to succeed, here’s what he was saying, don’t just focus on doing, focus on being, focus on who you are, the reputation you build, the character that you bring to your work. And that has to do with work habits and work ethic and all the rest. And I think your question to us is such a good question, because it reminds us that life doesn’t really come in two halves, that you flip the page one day or another, you’re doing some being and doing in the first half of life and you’re doing some being and doing in the second half of life. The amount of attention you pay, it seems to me, changes through life so that many of us are just so obsessed with the doing part, how can I succeed? How can I make it in that first half of life? Because we don’t know if we’re going to succeed or not. And then once we’ve answered that question, it makes sense that we turn to the inner life, we turn to being and so on.

Paul Swanson: I think that’s been one of the fun things about these conversations, is there’s been such a resonance, what you both have said about there is no linear transition point. Now I’ve reached age 40, and now I’m switched over in the second half of life. There’s always, in every conversation we’ve talked about kind of the muddy exchange that happens. There’s this time where or something happens to a young person that completely transformed their life and they are gifted or given a sense of wisdom because of what they’ve already experienced at a young age, but doesn’t mean they still don’t need the skillset of the first half of life. And that there are those in the second half of life linearly, but still have some work to do in the first half of life framework, but that we could play with this framework. It seems like such a freeing thing to be able to play in that middle space.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, I’ll tell you what, in the very first episode of this season when Richard was talking to Brene Brown, he introduced this metaphor of walking the plank. And he was talking about stepping into a new relationship or stepping into a new container, stepping into a new season of life. And then in the episode after that, Patrick Bolan had this mantra, and I think it was something like there’s always something new to let go of, there’s always something new to learn. And as I’ve listened to these conversations with so many elders, I can’t help but think, the other night Richard and I were sitting and talking and he was talking to me again about walking the plank, but he was talking about walking the plank in the context of his body slowing down as he’s getting older and saying it’s just one more thing to step into.

Dr. B, we’ve had some conversations, and you’ve talked about the fact that you never stop encountering opportunities to keep learning. This is the second part to that question for both of you. It’s really fun to think about the fact that we construct in the first half of life, then in midlife there’s this painful deconstruction, and then we figure it all out and cruise into this sunset with a pleasant reconstruction. But it seems like the deconstruction and the letting go and the unlearning just keeps on happening. What does that look like moving into that deeper season of being? Or if that doesn’t match your experience, feel free to let us know too. Not at all, it’s all roses after a certain point.

Barbara Holmes: Well, it's certainly not roses, because the very nature of things is that your body is not going to cooperate in the ways in which you'd want it to, even though you're full of vim and vigor and ideas. The time for gazing isn't just something you voluntarily do, it's something your body needs. It's something the silences are what you need then. You cannot drive yourself in the ways you drove yourself in the beginning when you were building reputation. For minorities, for people of color, BIPOC folks, the difficulty of it all is in that first half, you're not just doing it for yourself to build a reputation, but you've been told that the community is resting on your shoulders. I mean, we're still at the first Black female Supreme Court justice, the first this, the first that. The gates have been opened wide by martyrs, and you have got to run for the goal.

You've got to get that brass ring, whatever it is. And so you start running, and you don't know where you're running or why you feel like you have to go so fast. One of the things it did for me was it would not allow me to waste time when I hit a roadblock. The urgency of the community's needs and my own needs and my own ego development required that's not working, I'm out. I'm done. I'm going to law school. That didn't work. I don't like that very much. I'm going back. I'm going to get a PhD in what I should have done in the beginning, spiritual education. So there was just this sense of not wanting to tarry too long in infertile places. I mean, so right to go to the wilderness as Jesus did, called to pray, but you got to leave the wilderness. He had to go sometime. You got to get up out of there, get some dinner, drink a glass of water, and go back to where the people are. So that's my sense of it.

Mike Petrow: That's so powerful, and I suspect there's a lot of folks right now who are sitting with that permission to not tarry in infertile places. Thank you. Thank you for all that wisdom. Brian.

Brian McLaren: That messy middle, I remember those years very clearly. I was about 38, and I went to a older pastor who I respected. We were taking a walk, and I just poured out my heart to him and I said, "Something isn't working for me anymore. I'm really in struggle." And he was maybe 10 or 12 years older, and he said, "How old are you?" I said, "38." "Oh," he said, "38 to 42, worst four years of my life." And in a sense, I don't think this is true for everybody, but I think here's one way to look at it. If you start trying something when you're 16 or 18 or 22, and you work at it for 20 years, you either succeed or you fail or you sort of are in the middle. If you succeed, you can get kind of bored with it. You can say, "Been there, done that. Do I want to do the same thing for another 20 years?" And maybe you do, or maybe you find a way to make it a new challenge or something.

But if you succeed, that creates a problem. How do you keep interested and motivated and excited? If you fail, it creates another problem. Like, "I've been working at this for 20 years. I'm still not any good at it. Do I want to keep being miserable?" Or, "I don't know, I'm just somewhere in the middle. I feel mediocre. Do I want to keep doing what I'm mediocre at?" And so I think if we just realize, yeah, it doesn't matter whether you succeed or fail, there comes a time where life is long enough that you have to say, "Do I have permission for a new adventure?" And I think Dr. B, when you were talking about the different things you did in life, you said, "This isn't fertile, this isn't productive. I don't have to be stuck with this. I have permission for a new adventure." And oh, my gosh, thank God that life is full of new adventure opportunities.

Paul Swanson: I am reminded of that poem by Wendell Berry, *The Real Work*, where he talks about only

an impeded stream sings. And so there's times, I think, to further that metaphor of if you're not being challenged in the right way, the stream no longer sings. So you need to move on to new possibilities or even new problems where that challenge calls forth virtues and values that are seeded within that they need a chance to blossom. And so I often think about that poem in the sense of, am I being met with the right challenges that our mine to face, or am I faced in somebody else's challenges, or am I ignoring them? There's so many questions that are ripened for discernment for me within that.

Mike Petrow: I love that. I can't help but think about the previous chapter where Richard talks about the difference between necessary suffering and unnecessary suffering and recognizing what is our suffering to carry, what is our work to do. Obviously, I'm going to talk about Origen who says we need the scandalous, we need stumbling blocks, we need impossibilities. We need challenges to push us to deeper wisdom.

Brian McLaren: One of my dear friends and mentors who passed away some years ago, he had felt he should be a minister. He was very spiritually oriented and just could never really make it work. So he felt like a failure at ministry and started a business, and his business made a lot of money. And when he got to be in his mid 40s, he had so much money, he didn't really need any more money, but he looked at his business and he thought, "What could I do with this business that would have more meaning?" And so he looked, there was a whole category of jobs. I don't know how this came into his awareness, but there was a whole category of jobs that he could offer to formerly incarcerated people who when they get out of incarceration, not many people are willing to trust them with a job.

So he went on this adventure of saying in each of the... He had factories, several factories he'd built around the country, and he started having a quota of formerly incarcerated people who he would hire. Well, he found out that these formerly incarcerated people, many of them never had learned to read. So he said, "I want to be sure that all of these employees learn to read." So he set up reading tutoring and had a 90-minute period each week that was reading time, but he couldn't just have some employees do it. So everyone would bring a book. And on that day, every employee would read. So now he's looking at his company as this way of not just enriching him, but enriching the lives of his employees. And when he and I met, this was already up and running. It was beautiful.

And then he thought, "I'm going to retire soon." And he thought, "I'm going to figure out how to pass on this company to the employees." So instead of just selling it to somebody else who might've shut it down and sold it off for parts and then hurt all the employees, he thought, "I'm going to give this company to my employees. My employees will buy the company from me over a period of time." And to me, he didn't change jobs, but his mission changed in the process of keeping the same job.

Mike Petrow: I love that so much. One of the other themes that's emerged in this podcast and our work together with faculty like yourselves in the living school is this idea that our personal healing is in the service of the healing of the world, and our work to heal the world is in the service of our personal healing. And so I appreciate that, Brian. And also, it disillusioned me of a misunderstanding of this teaching that there may come a season where I'm not called to be out working in service, and yet there may not. The work continues if we're called to it, like you said, always a new adventure.

Paul Swanson: That's brilliant. And I love the seasonality of this, because I think it brings us, it seems like, second half of life wisdom to be more tuned to the seasonality of what is yours to do and to participate in practice or engagement or action in the world based on what the season is calling of you. And to recognize our own limitations with that helps us actually build a wider web of participation and become supporters of others and stepping back as we need to. And not just feeling like it's about me anymore, but it's about the greater story that wants to be told. How does that resonate with the two of you? Does that link up?

Brian McLaren: A place where it resonates with me is as a parent, I remember the point in my life where my kids were young adults and I started being more concerned about their success than my own. And then I watched when they had children, I started being concerned about their children's success more than my own. And so I think there is something in the cycle of life that makes us think about future generations. And maybe another way to say the same thing is to say that in that first half of life we're trying to achieve gain, gain a reputation, gain enough money to pay your bills or to repay your debts, gain enough to have a family, gain enough to indulge in a hobby that you've always wanted to do. And that work of gain is a great thing, but you reach a certain point, and you don't need any more gain in the same way that you did before.

Your ego doesn't need it to prove yourself. You've gotten beyond that. But now, coincidentally, at that point now your story becomes, how can I cope with loss? And one loss after another begins to come. And that coping with loss becomes a new set of challenges in the second half of life. And one of the losses is the loss of possibility, because every actuality, everything you actually achieved meant you shut off possibilities that are gone to you now. And that management of gain and loss, it seems to me, is part of this drama of the first and second half of life.

Barbara Holmes: I'm impressed by the cycles of life, because I have found that many things that I ignorantly passed by when doors were open to me and I should have walked through them, and I did not, it was because at that point in my life, I didn't know any better. And later on, as I began to move into the second phase, parts of life, small second phase parts, I began to realize that those same opportunities had come back around again in a different way. And that sometimes I recognized it and sometimes I didn't. But there was not this one and done that I had set up for myself.

That's my own paradigm of failure, that if you miss it once, well, you blew it. That's it. Too bad, you could have succeeded. But no, divine spirit brings it back around again. Sometimes in ways you don't discern right away, and you have opportunity after opportunity to accept or not accept. And there's no good or bad about either, that there's no value to assessing something to be not for you or for you, that your life is bigger than what you can categorize within boundaries. You'll miss opportunities, you'll gain some, you'll create some, you'll destroy some. And that's the rhythm of life.

Brian McLaren: Dr. B, when you say that, I feel like you are offering people liberation from a certain theological sickness, because God often gets brought into this, it was God's will for me to take path A and I missed it. So now the best I can ever have is path B. Or other people are like, "I'm already through the alphabet already, and I'm working on the Plan Z3 or something." But if we were to say, I remember feeling this as a father, if one of my daughters

had come to me when she was 18 and said, “Father, what do you want me to do with my life?” I’d say, “Well, it’s your life. I want you to decide.” “No, not my will. Your will be done.”

I would say, “The reason I gave you life is I’m your Father. I want you to actually have a life, and that means your own adventures and risks.” And if we could accept that God is with us in life in that way, it’s not that God doesn’t care, but the presence of that spirit of life and wisdom is not to somehow turn us into a bicycle that’s just a machine that the spirit is right. It’s to turn us into a great bicycle rider.

Barbara Holmes: No matter what the roads are, how bumpy.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Mike Petrow: I appreciate that metaphor, turning us into a great bicycle rider, because what I hear in what you’re saying is so much heart space for grief and hope. And the bicycle rider resonates so deeply, because if you’re going to ride a bike, you’re going to fall at some point, and you need to have the courage to keep getting back on the bike. One of our coworkers, Jennifer, lost someone very close in her life recently, and I lost a friend just last week, and we had this conversation, and Jennifer said something to me that resonated so deeply. She said, “You go through life and you just keep losing people.” And I think about the same thing. You miss opportunities. You say no to something. You recognize that you might’ve made a different choice. And she said, “And it’s hard to just keep your heart open, because it feels easier sometimes to just close off and protect yourself.” And so I think my question for the both of you in everything you’re talking about is, what has worked for you in keeping your heart open to love and to new possibilities?

Barbara Holmes: I think the thing that has helped me the most is realizing that I won’t be here forever, and our society teaches us to ignore those facts. I think that loss comes into our life, even as young people, to begin the preparation for total surrender. We are not folks who surrender anything easily. We want to be alive. We don’t want to transition. We want to see Jesus, but we don’t want to die to do it. If He could just stop by for dinner and leave, that would just be fine. But no, we are being prepared for something else.

And it is in the mysticism of Gullah traditions that your life is not a number, a dash, and a number, but a circle of life where people are coming and going, returning, advising, consulting. And because of the vastness of that cosmos, I’m not afraid to surrender when the time to surrender comes. That doesn’t mean that I won’t be holding onto life kicking and screaming, holding on, because life is good. God deemed it to be so. And I have enjoyed every bit of it, but there’s more. And if you can see the more beyond that last date and know that there is a life after life, we don’t know what dimension it’s in. We don’t know how, we don’t know where, but that’s a promise when Jesus says, “I go to prepare a place for you.” I believe that.

Brian McLaren: This is where all the hard work of the first half of life, if we do that hard work well, if we have good guides, like Richard has been to so many of us through this book and through his work, I think we develop these character qualities, like curiosity, like resilience, like the ability to let go and say that’s gone. Or as Dr. B was just saying, the sense to say, “Look, I’m

going to get a turn here in life, and my turn will be over. And I'll need to leave to make space for somebody else here on this planet." So I feel like those are just benefits that come in the second half of life from learning the lessons of the first half of life.

Paul Swanson: You've got me thinking about, both of you, about how right now my kids' lives, they're five and nine, everyone that they love is alive, and yet everyone who loves them is not necessarily alive. And how as they grow, they have to learn that shedding, that surrender, that not everyone that they love is going to be in the flesh. And they join that circle. And I think that so much of what this journey of life is is learning to enter that circle of love for before in the presence and the future, that it transcends time and that it's a continual unveiling on this human journey. And as I heard both of you talk, I wondered how has contemplative practice, contemplative mind, contemplative body been a part of your own unfolding to widen that gaze and widen your openhearted stance to the world? How has that played a role?

Barbara Holmes: I think the contemplative life for me was always present because it was part of the culture of our family. And so we just did an interview on *The Cosmic Way* with my cousin Linda Holmes, who is an author. She has written about the practice of midwifing on the African continent and in the South in America, and made those spiritual and actual connections. And so we were talking because she grew up in the same house I grew up in, my dad and her dad bought a house after World War II, a six-family house, and we all lived in that house. Nobody in the house was anything other than family.

And there were rhythms to that life where you bathed and sat on the porch in the afternoon and you were contemplative and you read. I mean, we read weird stuff growing up in Samoa. I do not know why my parents wanted me to read that. We read it. I think it was their way of offering us a type of sex education of the time, because nobody was going to talk about anything. But there were a few sentences in that book about sexuality they hoped we'd read, and from there glean everything we needed to know so that no discussion had to be had.

So it just was a rhythm of life. And then when I entered the field of spirituality and I watched at conferences, people jousting and giving papers and arguing with one another about the very basis of our thinking, I thought, "I don't want to do this." I could have stayed a lawyer if I wanted to do that. I don't want to do that. I want to know the heart of God. I want to cross that terrain from the ordinary to the mystical on a daily basis. And there's no other way to do it than contemplatively.

Paul Swanson: Thank you for that. Brian, how about you?

Brian McLaren: I suppose if I look back on periods in my life when I was less contemplative, it was because I was in pain and I was reacting. I was afraid and I clutched onto certainty. And whether it was fear or certainty, I've been blessed that I haven't had too many periods in my life where I was controlled by hate. But I would imagine that someone who's really been hurt could also have their life just dominated by hate. It seems to me there are certain kind of red-hot emotions like that, or reactivities like that that can make us less contemplative. And the interesting thing about those experiences is that they tend to make our lives a whole lot worse. If you live with bitterness and anger or if you're always afraid of something, you're always reactive, your life tends to get worse and it gets bad enough that then forces you to

become contemplative.

And so I would just say there's a saying in the 12-step world that you're only as sick as your reactivity. And so realizing how reactivity is the opposite of contemplation maybe helps us realize that contemplation is actually very natural. It's a natural part of life. It's other things that we're thrust into that throw us off balance so that we lose that balance, Barbara, that you were speaking of that just was part of the rhythm of childhood. It was a gift to you that no one even knew they were giving. It was the way other people had set up their lives in a nonreactive way that made room for you to live that way too.

Paul Swanson: Well, thank you. I think that's some good nourishing food to digest as we think. As all those listening, regardless of what half of life they think they are in or are in or are in the muddy middle, however it looks, that these are kind of nourishing invitations for how one can live this out.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. This is just such a rich and a beautiful conversation. And I hope that, as with this entire season of this podcast, it invites folks wherever they are in the journey to be open to the possibilities that are presenting themselves before them, to have the willingness to listen deeply and to have the wholeheartedness to grieve the things that they're letting go of.

Paul Swanson: Well said. Dr. B, Brian, thank you so much. We could talk to you for hours, but we are grateful that you are shining a light on ways of being a deep contemplative in the world and how your action and works flow out of that. And in between, you're gazing all the way. So thank you so much for your model and your teaching and presence.

Mike Petrow: Wow. Just what a gift it always is for us to sit with these two just absolute sages of contemplative wisdom in the world. What a gift we have to have them as dean and core faculty here at the CAC. Gosh, it's a feast for the heart today.

Paul Swanson: It is. I feel so lucky that I even get to be in the digital room with them having a conversation on the dearest matters of the heart and life, because the wisdom just naturally and generatively pours out through story, through deep study, and through presence. And listeners can't see it, but there's just big smiles and laughter that happens throughout, because there's a recognition of what they're outpouring to everyone listening.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. And it's so wholehearted that we can laugh together and cry together, that we can talk about letting go and talk about missed opportunities and talk about things that bring us to grief, and then also talk about the things that bring us to joy and new life and new opportunities every moment of our day, no matter where we are on the Falling Upward journey.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, well said. And I appreciated how you brought up the metaphor that Richard brought up in the first episode, of walking the plank, and then how you recently had a conversation with him and how it kind of got further nuanced. And there seems to be... I love metaphors that live in that way where they keep unfolding and unfolding, and we thought it'd be a wonderful way to end and lead folks with this contemplative prompt on walking the plank.

Mike Petrow: Oh, it's so good. And to remember, we're not talking about being pushed off the plank.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. This is in piracy.

Mike Petrow: Right. This is the invitation to step deeper into the unknown. No matter where you are in your life right now, no matter how young, no matter how old, where you are in the Falling Upward journey somewhere, you are being asked to step off the plank and to fall deeply into the unknown of new possibilities in letting go. Where are you being asked to walk the plank right now?

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Barb Lopez: Barb Lopez.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

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