



EVERYTHING BELONGS

A Second Simplicity
with Carmen Acevedo Butcher

Paul Swanson: Simplicity gets a bad rap in a complex world. Simplicity can be viewed as a dumbing down or even as a dismissal of the necessary intricacies of an interconnected life. In a thorny reality. This can be true, but there is a deeper truth, a radiant simplicity that warmly embraces complexity with a contemplative gaze. Father Richard calls this a second simplicity. It is the freedom of a beginner's mind that patiently engages paradox with a childlike wonder and intellectual inquiry while resting in the mercy of the mystery of God. In today's conversation, we meet back in Richard's hermitage with Richard and his faithful dog Opie, and dive into a conversation on chapter nine, A Second Simplicity. In our time together, we talk about the entangled journey with complexity and simplicity, meaning-making and the endlessly evocative ripples of the simplicity of the Gospels.

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

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson, and this is Everything Belongs.

Mike Petrow: Richard, I'm so excited that we get to talk to you about chapter nine, which is A Second Simplicity. So I love this passage you write, it's on page 106 for most people. You say, "As time passed, I became simultaneously very traditional and very progressive, and I've probably continued to be so to this day, I found a much larger and even happier garden." And you're referring back to the garden in Revelation 21. "I totally believe in Adam and Eve now, but on about 10 more levels." And you say literalism is usually the lowest level of meaning.

Richard Rohr: Well, I'm glad I said that in that book. I didn't know.

Mike Petrow: Oh yeah.

Richard Rohr: I already believe that way. Good. Good.

Mike Petrow: Listen to this part. It's great. "I've lived much of my subsequent life like a man without a country, and yet a man who could go to any country and be at home this nowhere land surprised even me. I no longer fit in with either the mere liberals or the mere conservatives. This was my first strong introduction to paradox, and it took most of midlife to figure out what had happened and how and why it had happened." And we were talking a few minutes ago, and I was telling you that I'd recently heard a Jungian say that we have to suffer because suffering introduces us to our own internal paradoxes.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Mike Petrow: And then that teaches us to think paradoxically so we can face the world in an adult way.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Mike Petrow: And you call that a second simplicity.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Mike Petrow: How does facing our paradoxes bring us to a second simplicity?

Richard Rohr: How? How does it do it?

Mike Petrow: Well, first, what does it really mean to face our paradoxes, to face our own catch-22s and inconsistencies, intentions?

Richard Rohr: When you're hurting, when you're not winning, when you're in the belly of the beast, you can't be your perfect self. You can't be your ideal self. You see all your inner contradictions to what you say you believe and what you really are. That's the big paradox that I thought I was a believer, but at this moment, I don't care about God at all. I just wish He'd get me out of there. You have to see that you're a mass of contradictions.

Now, you don't believe that until you experience it on an emotional level that I say this, but I feel that, if I'd be honest, one of the points I'm making in my new book on the prophets is when you see religion as a cult of innocence, you do not value self-knowledge. You really don't. In fact, I'm used to conservative Catholics telling me, "Your teaching is just psychology." And they say, "Just psychology", with a dismissive hatred in their voice. When you see religion as solidarity with human suffering, those people, for whatever reason, value self-knowledge, value because they begun to see the similarity between the soul and God. And that just keeps growing and growing and growing. God and we are not living in two different universes. We're children of God, we're offspring. We reflect the same universe. So I don't know that I'm answering your question now. Get me again.

Mike Petrow: Well, no, no, I appreciate that because when I first started studying Jungian psychology, people used to ask me, "What's the most important thing you're learning?" And I would say it's that just about everyone feels just about two opposite ways, about just about everything, just about all the time. They just don't know it's normal and they just don't know they have permission to feel that way.

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Mike Petrow: So I hear you saying that when we are honest, when we put a value on self-knowledge, we start to see those contradictions and those tensions.

Richard Rohr: We really do.

Mike Petrow: And what's wild is initially that sounds crazy making, but what I love in this chapter is you walk us from that place to the place of second simplicity, which is being at peace with that.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: And what does it look like to come to peace with that? Where does that take us?

Richard Rohr: You're at home in the real world. You don't try to differentiate between totally good and totally bad. I mean, I have to say it, some people hate me for it, but the Tao symbol comes to mind. It's really brilliant. Yin and yang. In the middle of the white, there's a black dot. In the middle of the black, there's a white dot, damn it. But that's the shape of everything, if you're honest about it.

So the connection I'm trying to make in the book on the prophets is these very people who valued honest self-knowledge are people who value self-criticism. Once you know yourself, honestly, you say, "You know, I'm not the perfect being. I've created in my mind that I am."

It's very humbling. It's a necessary humbling, an important humbling. It's why holy people are always humble. If they're not humble, they're not holy because they've seen the truth and the truth is me, and I'm a reflection of everything else too. Then I grant my neighbor that same mercy. "Oh, I know you're not perfect. I'm not shocked anymore." You understand? But you grant that naturally just by moving in the world. You don't have to make it a grand statement, "I'm being merciful to you." That would be terrible. You know that it's a broken world. And if God doesn't love this broken world, God has nothing to love, nothing, that we have this much hatred.

Paul Swanson: And I think this is part of why *Falling Upward* can be such a helpful text. When I was looking over your book and doing the reading for these conversations, one of the things that became very apparent to me was looking at the different titles that led up to *Second Simplicity*, and it kind of shows you what you got to go through.

Richard Rohr: Tell me.

Paul Swanson: You got to go through the tragic sense of life, the stumbling stone, necessary suffering, home and homesickness, amnesia and the big picture. And then you arrive at the second simplicity.

Richard Rohr: The second simplicity.

Paul Swanson: Which it kind of feels like it's a somewhat earned and unearned creative beginner's mind where you know you can know and act upon only so much paradox and that you have to let the rest, rest in mercy and mystery. How would you put that in your own words of you can accept so much paradox, but you also can't own and know everything? Would you say you let the rest, rest in mercy and mystery?

Richard Rohr: Yeah, that's what it comes down to. You're sensing how delicate a line it is because we don't want people to end up with the universe is chaos. We're not saying it's chaos. It's paradox. That's why I think Jung resorted to the Language of Alchemy, [foreign language 00:09:43]. I list them all in my next book. Why can't I think of it right now? But he watched what happened in chemical mixtures and said, "This is what happens when you hold opposites together. They form a new *soluzio*." Now, remember, alchemy, its original goal was to create gold. They thought if they put together the right minerals, they could create gold. Well, he got it. He's talking about creating inner gold and you hold your sin and your forgiveness or your compassion together and you've got gold. But it doesn't happen in a minute because you thought that, it happens over time. That's why all things being equal, older people should be wiser. They've had time for the gold to metamorphize.

Mike Petrow: I love any alchemical metaphor because I love the idea of first taking things apart, recognizing the opposites and the tensions that we hold so we can put them back together in a new way, recognizing that when we hold things in tension, a new possibility can emerge. Recognizing the transformation that comes from holding that tension. Richard, how do you think we do this in our spiritual lives when we sit with our own tensions and our own contradictions?

Richard Rohr: When you let things be complex and you don't have to resolve it, but you hold it,

in its complexity the paradox is it becomes simple. Now, it might take weeks or months or for many big issues, for many people, even years where the contradiction is overcome. Now, what overcomes it is a jolt of love, of compassion, of sympathy, of empathy. Now, if you're blocked toward those, it won't happen. Hatred will exaggerate the difference, the complexity, but a jolt of love.

Even look, you got the, well, you would know this as a father, just looking at your little babies, just their face is so beautiful to you, I'm sure, and suddenly you're softened. Yeah. And then the knowledge that you created that together with your wife, but you did. Oh my goodness, it's all one. If that's beautiful, I who created it am also beautiful. *Contemplata* just means, "To look, to see", the Latin word at least, and you have to look a long time to see things correctly. I used to call it the first glance and the second glance, the first glance is always off. It's lust. It's not love. And what I mean by that is how could I use it for my own aggrandizement? But the second look is love. That's why I bet, I don't want you to confess here, but I hope you didn't marry your first girlfriend. The first one is all lust, and you have to learn from it and then choose one where now you're just capable of the beginnings of love.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Well, there's so many directions we can go with that one. I'm going to take a different direction just because of what popped in my mind as you were talking about. That was there's this exhibit of Georgia O'Keeffe and Henry Moore, the sculptor, and so to have them paired together. And what I'm noticing is because my daughter is taking an art class there, so I would get free access to this. I've been three times already. It's only been open a month, and there's a first glance.

Richard Rohr: Oh, it must be great.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. There's a first glance of looking at art where you're just kind of like, "Oh, that's cool. That's neat."

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: But then when you keep revisiting it and you sit with it, there's something that-

Richard Rohr: Good for you, Paul.

Paul Swanson: There's scales that start to fall or there's things that start to really shine through that you weren't noticing before. And for me, it connects to what you're talking about with the lust then love. And we certainly do that with people, but I think art and truth, we don't always notice a truth at first glance until we sit with some of the truisms that we've grown up with and the deeper meanings get revealed through them. And I think-

Richard Rohr: Beautiful.

Paul Swanson: Some of the simplicity of the gospel, it gets more nuanced than textured the longer I sit.

Richard Rohr: Good word, textured.

Mike Petrow: So Paul, that tees up a question I have. Tell me if this makes sense. It's going to take me a second to get there, but I love that you just used the word "meaning" and that you described it as a deepening experience over time. I love talking about meaning. Meaning is so central to who we are as humans. I love Viktor Frankl who wrote *Man's Search For Meaning*.

Richard Rohr: *Search For Meaning*.

Mike Petrow: He said that, "We as humans are meaning makers, we're meaning generators and that we need meaning to survive." "But if we have a sense of meaning", he says this as a person who survived Auschwitz, "If we have a sense of meaning, we can navigate anything". He quotes, "He who has a why to live for can deal with any how." When I think about Jung who says that, "We need meaning so deeply that if we don't have a meaning for our lives, we get sick." Right? Jung defined-

Richard Rohr: That's America today.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Yes, yes, absolutely.

Richard Rohr: Making money is not a meaning. It's a tactic.

Paul Swanson: It's a neurosis.

Mike Petrow: Well, and that's it. Jung says that, "Every neurosis is a suffering of a soul that hasn't discovered its meaning." And yet I don't think that meaning is a rational reality, right? It's not an equation that makes things make sense.

Richard Rohr: No, no.

Mike Petrow: What does it mean to have a deepening sense of meaning for our lives? That's my question, Richard. What does meaning mean?

Richard Rohr: That's excellent. I think in part what the Germans meant by their word "Gestalt", where just suddenly you get a skeleton, almost a shape. You get the scaffolding, and it works so that you can hold all your little conflicts together or little tensions together. It's the superstructure or the substructure. Either one applies, but it's not the structure itself. That's what the Gospel is supposed to give us, that God is using the cross to bring us to resurrection. Once you have that big scaffolding, it's amazing how much you can fit inside of it. So meaning is the big superstructure and substructure that is largely held unconscious. And the word we had for that till the Enlightenment was myth. A good myth. It doesn't operate consciously. It operates unconsciously.

Mike Petrow: Well, I think it's in that first quote that we started with where you mentioned moving beyond the literal.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: I think we take our good stories and trap them in literalism and make them about history instead of what's more true.

Paul Swanson: Yes. Yeah. There's a snippet from last night. My kids have discovered Calvin and Hobbes. You remember that comic strip?

Mike Petrow: How could I forget?

Paul Swanson: We have all the books. I've been waiting eight and a half years for my kids to pick up one of these books, and so we've been reading it.

Richard Rohr: Do they have to be a certain age to appreciate them?

Paul Swanson: There's the level of storytelling and somewhat philosophical nature.

Richard Rohr: It's a little older.

Paul Swanson: It's a little older, so there's things in there that they're not picking up on, but it's also very, very funny.

Mike Petrow: It's brilliant.

Paul Swanson: But in the comic, Calvin mentions purgatory.

Richard Rohr: Really?

Paul Swanson: So my daughter asks, who's eight and a half asks, "What is purgatory?" So then we started talking about purgatory and heaven and hell, and I'm thinking, this is so great because I'm pointing towards the mythic imagination. She needs to know that these concepts are real things that we walk through. And to your point about here and now, but also it was safer for that in this comic strip of a six-year-old and his stuffed animal tiger. It was a safe way to talk about it then within the context of potentially a church institution, because this was way more playful, a lot more laughing, and then it became a playground instead of a classroom and then picking it up.

Richard Rohr: And you did that with your kids.

Paul Swanson: And we did that, and it seems really, it was a really fun conversation, but-

Richard Rohr: How long did it take?

Paul Swanson: Oh, 10 minutes.

Richard Rohr: Oh, okay. That's all they can sustain.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Part of our kind of parenting philosophy is how can we keep spotlighting these moments as they arrive?

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's beautiful.

Paul Swanson: Where we can point out these mythic imagination opportunities.

Richard Rohr: I can't wait to see what your kids are like.

Mike Petrow: Well, and we touched on this in our last episode. I feel like this is what second simplicity is, right? We talked about how in our last episode, a lot of us deconstruct a painful and terrifying theology of heaven and hell.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And then we throw the images away.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Whereas the second simplicity is coming back, and when we come back to them as images, when we recognize that Jesus talks about heaven and hell all the time, but Jesus is always teaching in parables, and when we realize He's being parabolic and metaphorical, it doesn't make it matter less. It makes it matter more.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: But in a completely different way, in a completely different way because it talks about things that matter in this life and matter now. Talk about purgatory. We've all been in that uncomfortable liminal place.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, very good. Is it in Matthew's Gospel where it says, and He only taught in parables.

Mike Petrow: Oh wow.

Richard Rohr: If that's true. He was telling us, don't get literal about all this. It's a story He only taught in parables.

Mike Petrow: That's so powerful.

Paul Swanson: How quickly we forget.

Mike Petrow: No, it's so true because we do take everything as parable. But if He's talking about heaven or hell, we immediately create a literal theology.

Richard Rohr: Literal, yeah.

Mike Petrow: Around that and it says He only taught-

Paul Swanson: And we know who's going where.

Mike Petrow: And we know who's going where. Absolutely.

Richard Rohr: Protestants, you're all going to hell, did you know that?

Paul Swanson: Oh, I thought it was the Papists.

Mike Petrow: Call no man, "Father", Richard.

Richard Rohr: It's all so smokey.

Mike Petrow: Oh gosh, what a gift.

Richard Rohr: What else you got?

Mike Petrow: I think that's for me where I would want to land this one is one more thought on what it is to have a sense of meaning, and it's that mythic imagination. It's that having models and stories and guides. Not a flat formula. But Richard, what parting word of wisdom can you give us with having a sense of mysterious and flexible meaning for our lives?

Richard Rohr: Remember that old diagram I used to use more often of the cosmic egg where you had my story at the center? You got to make sense out of it. That's your landing field, your takeoff field, I guess. Then you have your group story, which you live inside of, and you tend to absolutize that. So that's why you need other people's stories to relativize your group story.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: It's necessary. Then if you have that meaning is the story, the big scaffolding that holds it all together. So I don't go crazy. Remember Ron Rolheiser, a wonderful theologian teaches in San Antonio. Someone asked him once, why do most Catholics get so obsessed about going to mass every Sunday? Not that they do anymore, but they used to. And he thought for a minute he said, "Because I think they'd go crazy if they didn't." Which sounds like a non-answer. You should say, "To love Jesus, Lord. They'd go crazy if they didn't." They've got to repeat something.

It holds together their meaning system, but it's almost entirely unconscious. And the meaning system is this. The world is meaningful.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: That's the meaning system. Now, how do you construct that? Each of us does it a little differently. The teenage boy who is obsessed with sports, that's his meaning system. Trouble is it's all about winning and losing. And for me to win, I've got to create losers. That's why that paradigm has tended to win, win-lose, not win-win. The win-win mind has only really emerged on a broader level, would say in the last 75 years, starting with people like Gandhi. Now, Jesus gave it to us, but Jesus was way ahead of time and the world wasn't ready, still isn't ready for Jesus. But He did give us a-

But he did give us a perfect scaffolding to live in a win-win world where we can even love our enemies. There's no way to describe it but win-win, when you're told to love your enemies. And when he idealizes Samaritans over Jews, this man is revolutionary. Huh? So meaning is, it sounds like I'm saying nothing, meaning is to know that I don't know it consciously. It operates in the unconscious I think. I don't wake up each day, "I have a meaning for my life." But it's operative. And what reveals it is happiness.

Mike Petrow: Interesting.

Richard Rohr: You're not irritated at everything because it all has meaning. You can grin, you can smile, you can care, you can have compassion. Happiness is a good giveaway and the ability for other people to create their happiness even at your expense. In other words, to allow yourself to be

laughed at when you can maintain your sense of humor about your own group, your own eccentricity.

Mike Petrow: And therein is the catch-twenty-two. I know we're running out of time and we need to stop, but the catch-twenty-two, of one, knowing that we need a sense of meaning and that it's one of the greatest gifts for us. And two, obsessing about feeling like we need to find the deep meaning in everything.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mike Petrow: What's the thing you say-

Richard Rohr: It won't be deep, it'll be invisible, but operative.

Mike Petrow: And what is it? Is it mystery that you say it's not that it has no meaning, but it has infinite meaning?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: How's that go?

Richard Rohr: Mystery is not you can't figure it out, but you can never stop figuring it out. There's no end to its unfolding. That's mystery.

Mike Petrow: And perhaps that's what meaning is, is tapping into the mystery of our own life, that there's no end to its unfolding.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Mike Petrow: Right? Confronting our paradoxes, knowing those paradoxes go on forever, learning to laugh at them, letting them teach us to love paradox around us and just letting it unfold infinitely.

Richard Rohr: I see Catholics do that. I don't mean to say it's just Catholics. I'm sure you all do it. But with the Eucharist, there's constantly a new book coming out with "Oh, it means that. It means that. It means that." I have become friends with a Greek Orthodox priest who's left the priesthood, so this isn't his job security anymore, and he's writing a book on the Jungian analysis of the mass.

Mike Petrow: Ooh.

Richard Rohr: I said, "Why would you be writing that?" He said, "Because it's true." That tells you whatever Jesus meant by this, "Do this in remembrance of me." It's a mystery. It never stops unfolding. Like see, the old atonement theory, that had no mystery to it. It was cut and dried. Debt had to be paid. Jesus paid it. A lot of blood flowed. It was a lot of sin. It's all transactional, as I say. It's not helpful. It's not mystery. Mystery you can move around inside of.

Paul Swanson: Mystery can be enjoyed.

Richard Rohr: That's a good word. Mystery can be enjoyed. Tell me something, what would be a mystery

inside of your Protestant upbringing? What maintained a level of mystery? The notion of grace, maybe?

Paul Swanson: Oh, I mean, yeah, grace is the first one that comes up for me.

Richard Rohr: Grace, yeah. And it's true.

Paul Swanson: Saved by the blood of Jesus. Grace is... Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Too different.

Paul Swanson: Too different, but also connected.

Richard Rohr: Oh, I got you.

Paul Swanson: Thanks to the blood of Jesus, grace is now everywhere and just waiting for you to receive it. So what a mystery, the blood of this one person-

Richard Rohr: That's right

Paul Swanson: -the man, God. But what were you going to say, Mike?

Mike Petrow: I mean, I grew up Pentecostal spirit-filled Pentecostal. So there was also an infinite mystery in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Richard Rohr: Oh, that's good. Yes.

Mike Petrow: I experienced mystery in the tensions, the tension of being taught how to find God, but then also being told to trust personal experience and the individual revelation of the spirit or the tension of grace and also wanting to be holy and righteous and so on and so forth.

Richard Rohr: That's what made me write the Litany of the Holy Spirit. And I wrote it on my 65th birthday, 25 years ago. I was in Hermitage. The spirit meant this and this and this. And I came up with 65 words for the Holy Spirit. And now I'm sure I could add 25 more because that's a good example. The Holy Spirit is mystery.

Mike Petrow: You were just a kid then.

Richard Rohr: Just a kid. I thought I was drawing it all down.

Mike Petrow: Giving us the deep meaning before you left this world.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: You're fun. Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Today we're joined by Dr. Carmen, Acevedo Butcher, the author of Practice of the Presence and the award-Winning Translation of the Cloud of Unknowing, a Carnegie Foundation, professor of the Year, and Fulbright senior Lecturer, Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher teaches at the University of California Berkeley in the college writing programs. Carmen is also an

affiliate faculty at the CAC.

Carmen, it is so great to have you here today. We are such fans of your work, your person, your presence, everything that you bring with you, all the tools and all the wisdom. You light up any room that you're in. And so it's been a joy getting to know you these past few months and the work that we've done together. And you've been a part of the CAC in these past nine months. You've been a part of virtual gatherings, you've become an affiliate faculty, you've now a guest on a podcast, been a part of our Essentials of Engaged Contemplation program. The joy just keeps unfolding as we get to know you and you offer your expertise in all these different mediums, and that's just only one part of your life. You do a lot in this world.

What of all the things that you're doing right now, what's given you joy? What's sparking life in the way that you're showing up in the world today?

Carmen Butcher: Wow. Thank you all for those kind words. And it's great to be with you and Mike, especially because I'm so grateful to the Center for Action and Contemplation for decades. And just this morning I was checking Facebook and a former student sent me a message saying, and this is the best message you ever get. "It's not public yet, but I want to share with you some exciting news about a residency that I just secured." And this is a student who is first generation, who's really worked incredibly hard, who I had the honor of teaching and being taught by. And I just wrote her back saying, "Thanks for sharing it."

And this is what makes my life sing, is working with students at Berkeley. I'm an adjunct professor there and in the college writing programs, and I teach research and first-year composition and public speaking, and they really care about the world. They really inspire me. They inspire me to listen better every day to figure out where they are, what are they struggling with and how can I make their lives maybe a little bit better? And they really want the planet to be healed and to be a part of that. They're part of that tikkun Olam really. They want to repair the world, and I just want to be alongside them and help them as best I can. But getting a message like that is just sunshine.

Mike Petrow: So great. We'll say more about this in a second, but Carmen working with you the last few months. I'm such a huge fan of you as a human. I'm so grateful for the work that you do in the world and who you are in the world. I appreciate you as a translator and a scholar. I appreciate you as a student of contemplation, going all the way back to its ancient origins. I appreciate you as a contemplative. And I think in saying all of that, I love that your teaching is so accessible, and yet you are so effortlessly and unashamedly brilliant.

But the thing that right away caused me to immediately trust you as a teacher, aside from the fact that we'd shared a few really fun exchanges on social media, but what really did it was listening to how deeply you listened to your students and how deeply you cherish the stories and the lives that each one of them are living. And that to me, we may get into this in this episode, the notion of a good teacher always being a good student. It just struck me. You live that so well and the love you have for your students is so palpable in the way that you talk about them. I really appreciate that.

Carmen Butcher: Thank you, Mike. That means a lot. It's definitely something that has helped me to

grow as a human being, that love, because they return it and it is overwhelmingly joyful. I'm really grateful.

Mike Petrow: I love that. The other thing you did Carmen that immediately caused me to trust you is listening to the way that you listen to nature. I know one of the things we have in common is the love of just getting out out in the wilderness and letting the birds and the trees talk. Would you be willing to share with our audience about your sacred space where you go out in nature?

Carmen Butcher: Oh wow. That's my favorite question I've ever been asked. My husband and I, we live about 10 minutes, 15 minutes walk from a marsh, and it was reconstructed many years ago, it backs up onto a strait, so it has some water flowing in and out also and goes on to the bay eventually. But I get to see the tide come in and out. I go there as often as I can every day, if I can. And it really started meaning even more during the start of the pandemic, because there was nowhere else to go. And so even though I've walked in nature my whole life, and you know how Randy Woodley always says, nature was his first text really of God, and for me too, how nature speaks to me. And so I just walk out there with the egrets and the ducks and I talk with them and I talk with the marsh, I talk with the reeds and in some ways recapture being a child who is whole.

And sometimes I complain out there, but mostly what I do out there is just soak in the awe of, "Wow, I cannot fly. Isn't this amazing that you can?" And just feeling this interconnectedness on an embodied level so that my mind can't explain me out of it. I can only explore it and be in awe. It's the same for me as if I'm on my knees at the end of the bed. It really reduces me to this joyful ground level. Wow. I'm dependent on all of this. And part of it's dependent on me too somehow.

Paul Swanson: I love how particular spaces can become a holy spot or a sacred cathedral of the world that you get to enter. And this popped into mind as you you're talking, is it the Gospel of John where Jesus and the disciples have a spot or the place, they always kind of reference it as something that they go to, but I always think of it as, I hope it was just beautiful. We all have these little sacred spots, whether it's in our hometown or nearby, that we go to kind of enter into this sense of smallness before the mystery of God. And I think hearing you talk about it, even though I've never been there, I have my own places and I can live through that particularity to my own universal experience of what it feels like to be in that awe and wonder and humbled to my own little sweet corner of the cosmos.

Mike Petrow: I love that. I love that so much. And I love hearing, Carmen, hearing you describe your spot. It reminds me of my little spot on the Rio Grande where I chase porcupines and they make their waddling their noises and then get way up in the trees. Listers who don't know that porcupines climb trees and hang out in the koala bears, you're missing out and chase coyotes. And ducks love those ducks. It's such a gift. And this is what I've loved Carmen too, is sending photos back and forth of ducks and sandhill cranes and just seeing the divine in that. And what was it, you said it a second ago, did, you said it's a place you go. Did you say to recapture the wonder of being a child who is whole? How did you say that? That was so-

Carmen Butcher: Yeah, it's just, I just find myself very, it's that child likeness and whole, that wholeness of, I know Patrick was on the other day, Olin, talking about your true self. It really is just

me as a kid before love, and I'm whole in that essence, I'm totally whole. Still healing, mind you, and also whole, and I love it. And I just want to say, because we talk about paradoxes so often that to the side of the marsh is a wastewater plant and a little further on are the railroad tracks. So it's life. It's all of life. But yeah, Mike, I want to say the ducks are my favorites too. Like you and I've talked about, we love the ducks.

Mike Petrow: I just love ducks. They're so great.

Paul Swanson: I'm more of a sandhill crane kind of guy.

Mike Petrow: I mean, the Sandhill cranes are majestic and beautiful, but ducks are everywhere. They let things slide off their back. They look totally calm above the surface, but under the surface, they're moving around. Every time I pass a duck on a run, I can't help myself but being like, "Hey, duck buddies." And a lot of people look at me like I'm crazy. But anyway, this is not The Duck podcast. I love that so much, Carmen. And the joy of being a child who's whole standing before love. What a great way to enter a conversation about Second Simplicity, which is the chapter we're talking about today.

Before we jump into that, and let's put a pin in that and definitely come back to it. One of the things I love, Carmen, when we reached out to you, it was our mutual friend, Mirabai Starr, who first put you on my personal radar. She actually gave me a stack of your books at one point and said, "Read all Carmen's translations." When I reached out to you, if we reached out, Paul and I reached out to you to ask if you'd be interested in potentially talking about maybe working with the Center for Action and Contemplation. I love that you already knew Richard and you were already a big fan of his work and Jim and some of our other teachers. I'd love to ask, do you remember how you first encountered Richard's work?

Carmen Butcher: Well, first, let me just say that Mirabai Starr, she's amazing that she gave you a stack of books. Yeah, I love her. And her translations in other books. Well, I can definitely remember when I first met Richard because I was exhausted. And I think that that was in a way good because it meant my defenses were down and I was really kind of an open vessel to receive. It was over 30 years ago, and I just have to say that I know for me, school has always been, was a way out of an abusive childhood home. So my mother made my clothes and we weren't wealthy and grades making A's for me was the way that I was able to get scholarships, which enabled me to go to school. So grades were kind of like bricks in this path I was trying to build out to freedom.

And I didn't know I had dyslexia, so I just thought I was dumb. This really makes me a kinder teacher, I'll be honest with you. It ended up being a blessing in that way. But everything took so much longer. But somehow, thank you God and kind teachers, I made it through college and I made it through a PhD. And this is when I met Richard. So I had just climbed the mountain of a PhD. They say, "You don't get a good PhD, a good PhD gets you." And it was the first in my family, and I felt so full. I had just spent all this time analyzing all the books of American and British Lit and being queried by all these brainiacs. And I was tired of reading as a job. Paul, you and I have talked about this. I had read so much for school that it had become overwhelming. It felt like a job.

But I was still a person who browsed bookstores. So I'd given up reading, which sounds odd

to say out loud, but I was browsing in a bookstore and I came upon this very unassuming book and I open it up and on one of the front pages, it just had one word, and in between each letter of this word was a little centered dot. So it was S.I.M... And it spelled out simplicity. And I'm like, okay, I can handle reading that. Simplicity. Well, then I turned the page and I see this German, and I had studied on a rotary in Heidelberg for a year, and it said on there, "Von der Freiheit los Zulassen." And I was like, "The freedom to let go. I need that." Because I had all this stuff I had crammed in and walks had helped me kind of take it in.

Because I walked during my dissertation and PhD studies, but I needed to let go, but I didn't know how. So then I noticed the dedication because I'm always trying to figure out is this person who wrote this book kind? Because if not, that's going to change my perspective. But the dedication was so kind. It was to the little and to the family and friends of this person. And I hadn't really heard of the author so much, maybe just in passing, but not really to stop. And then it had two quotes on the Frontest piece. And I think these sum up everything. One is by T.S Eliot from the four Quartets, the third point. And it says this, "These are only hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses, and the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action. The hint, half guessed, the gift half understood is incarnation."

So T.S Eliot, top of the intellect, top of white culture, really. Western civilization. And the other quote was by a poor man in Nairobi. And at first I thought it was a parable. It says, "Oh Lord, don't ever let us move into stone houses." But when you read the book, you find out that it's actually Richard Rohr who had spoken at a cathedral in Nairobi. And he even asked someone there, "What does that mean? Don't let us move into stone houses." And they told them, "We live in huts and we have no doors. So your family's my family. We come and go. My family's your family. As soon as you build a stone house, you have doors. As soon as you have a door, you have a lock. As soon as you have a lock, you have belongings. And there's this separation." And I was like, who is this person?

And then I know this isn't the book we're talking about today, but Richard's repertoire is so deep. But I got to chapter seven, What is This Women's Stuff? And he explained my whole past. So it ended with the feminine insight as a rediscovery of Jesus's spirit, and people should come over things. And I felt lighter just looking at the book in the bookstore. So I bought it and walked out. So it was Simplicity, Richard's book, Simplicity. And that's how really he began to lighten my load. A good teacher will lighten your load and give you more joy. Doesn't weigh you down.

And here's the thing, I just want to say this about Richard before we get too deep. I heard long ago that there were two kinds of teachers. There were the teachers who when you take their class, you're like, "Oh my goodness, you're brilliant." And then sometimes when students tell you that, you also find they might be saying things like, "But I don't really understand what we're learning." But the teacher is brilliant. And then they say, but the other teachers are the ones when you leave their class, you think to yourself as you leave that teacher's class, you think, "I think I might be smart and I understand things better." And with Richard, that's always what I came away with, was like, "I matter. I'm worthwhile. I have something to offer. I'm smart" It wasn't everything either, but smart in the sense that I can learn.

... everything either. But smart in the sense that I can learn and also that everything about me was okay. Yeah. So I just want to say that that's what I love about Richard. Yes, absolutely, he's brilliant. But that's not the first thing you think about him.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I had a professor once say, "You can admire from afar, but you can only make an impact up close." And I think that that connects to the way that different teaching styles. You can admire the intellect from afar of someone who's so brilliant they blow you away, which is fantastic. That's not to be negated. But the impact up close where you feel that resonance of I am smart, I do have these giftings that I can also feel being watered by this teacher.

One more point about everything that you shared, what you learned from Richard, you embody in your teaching. So it's fun to see that connection of all these things that you're naming about, Richard, that we also bear witness to in you as well. Just to bring that full circle.

Mike Petrow: No, I love that. And I haven't, it's so funny. You and I have talked a bunch about this Carmen because I'm also dyslexic, also had a wild being terrible and through high school and then working my way to PhD. But it didn't occur to me until listening to each other that I also discovered Richard as I was finishing my doctorate right before I defended. And I actually real quick re-edited my dissertation to sneak Richard in. But he was. When I was absolutely burned out and was like, I can't do this anymore. He came into my life. I'm going to think more about that.

But one of the things I appreciate about him as a teacher and spot-on Paul, what we appreciate about you as a teacher Carmen, is there are some teachers who tell you what to think. And there are some teachers who tell you how to think. They help you discover for yourself. They help you learn how to learn. And I've always said a good teacher to me is someone who's willing to be a student. I've said this about you specifically, Carmen a bunch of times. A good teacher maintains their curiosity and is always asking questions. And they let their own students be their teacher. So all that to say in the things that we learned from Carmen, I'd love to know last but not least, when did you first bump into *Falling Upward* in general, just the book?

Carmen Butcher: Well, it was about 14 years ago when I was 20. No, I was 49. And you know how in episode one, Brené Brown was talking about her second time through when she was writing the forward. "That it felt like it saved my life," she said. And when I heard that, I was like, that's it. I literally felt like it saved my life. And I'm going to get emotional. It made me feel safe. It was less of a reading experience and more of an embodied encounter with love.

Because at that time, on the outside, my life looked together. And later I would learn I was living with high-functioning depression, which fortunately I don't have now. But I was doing the best I could. I was living with my very kind husband, Sean, he's British. We met in England. Our two young children, I was teaching full time in a tenured job at a college in Georgia.

I used to think this all the time. If you looked at my resume, you'd be like going, "You don't have any reason to have any problems." Because I was Phi Beta Kappa. I'd done all the things

you were supposed to do in academia. I'd published some books. I translated very recently *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I'd been really pulled to it. It was a very intense experience of *Lectio Divina* because all the people I've ever translated do *Lectio*. And so when you translate them, you reread the Bible verses. I mean, that's one of the things I did in graduate school was read the Bible through three times with commentaries to learn what it actually says not what I was always preached growing up. But when you're translating, and these are people who seamlessly bring the Bible into all of their thinking, anytime there's a biblical allusion, you literally stop what you're doing and you go study it for a long time.

So it was, in other words, it was nine months of about six to eight hours a day of translating aka *Lectio Divina*, sacred reading, steeping in it. And that was for me, shadow work. Because I remember thinking at the time, have you ever noticed *Carmen*? Because you know how you have conversations with yourself. And I was doing all the things. I was taking our children to school. I was volunteering at their schools. Doing talks to third-graders and things like that. But I remember telling myself at the time, "Have you ever noticed you don't hurt as much when you're translating?" Because I was able to sort of take the focus off of that.

Because what I was taught growing up was that you swallowed your hurt. That was just what you did. You didn't voice it. I mean, they often talk about that's the way that men do, but it was also my experience that I was just taught to be ... That was being brave and counting your blessings. But it gave me such a pain that was unresolved.

And so after working with *The Cloud of Unknowing* and it translating me, I totally was undone. And I had the sensation of falling. Now isn't this interesting, that falling upward? *Falling Upward* came into my life then because my falling was down, I was falling. And for the first time in my life, I couldn't trust my mind. I was having suicidal thoughts that really scared me. I had two young children, I love them very much, and my husband and I thought, I've got to go to counseling. That was not how I was raised to think to go to counseling. But I found a counselor and went. And at the end of that, it's like a whole graduate degree really counseling. After the end of that year plus of intense counseling in February of 2011, *Falling Upward* came out and I bought it.

So it's like I went from my therapist to Richard, again. And once again, Richard enters my life when I'm exhausted. But at least this time I have more integrated the trauma of my childhood. So I have more of a space to take in. And what did he bring me? *The Good News*. He brought me also later of course Jim Finley through the Center for Action Contemplation who says that God comes to you as your life, I think he says. And he also says, "Only love has the power to name who you are." And so I'm sitting with this book and finding Richard describing the path I could take now at 49. I mean that's kind of almost perfect half of life because I plan to live to be like 98.

So I guess I just want to say mostly my gratitude to be able to be on this podcast. Because what I really want to express in it is my utter gratitude for Richard. For how he stood up, how he practiced meditation and how he lived it out so that when I needed a teacher and so many others, his works were there, his presence was there. Because Paul, you often talk about safe containers, how we need safe containers. And it always makes me think of Mike's and Mike's teacher, a psychoanalyst, Ann Ulanov who talks about how we need safe containers so

we can discover what we already possess.

So I really thought I was worthless, really. And Richard taught me that I have worth, that God loves me. And this sounds so simple when you say it out loud, but until you know it and experience it, it's just words on a page. And Richard made that as he likes to say, sometimes you infect people. It's like he passed that spark onto me, all those things that we say. But when it happens to you, it's so life-changing.

Mike Petrow: A few things. Thanks for mentioning Anne Ulanov. Yes, we love her so much as a teacher. She's brilliant as a Jungian theologian. Two, this idea of safe containers is so wild. And I'm thinking about the top of our conversation where we talked about being in these places of nature that create safe containers for us. And Carmen your experience of being in that place and being in the wholeness of a child standing in love.

And it's leading me to ponder how in *Falling Upward*, we talk about moving from the first half of life to the second half of life. But how much of the second half of life is actually going back to the first half of life to heal wounds and to do work that's left from a challenging childhood or a difficult loss or an existential dilemma or a deep depression or all of the above plus stuff? I love that. I love that. I love that.

Also, I love Carmen that you mentioned your connection with Cloud and then reading *Falling Upward*. Because one of the things that we know is that in this chapter of *Falling Upward*, *Second Simplicity*, Richard in a footnote specifically mentions your translation of *The Cloud* as a translation that had recently come out that he was a huge fan of. So what a fun synchronicity and connection. Did you spot that the first time you read through the book?

Carmen Butcher: Well, yeah. But it was a surprise. I don't remember if I knew ahead of time. I only remember that because I'm the kind of person that reads footnotes, nerd alert. And I just remember reading one of the quotes about unknowing and knowing, how they can change you. And I thought that sounds very like *The Cloud of Unknowing*. And I go to the quote and I'm like, oh gosh, that's my name.

And the fact that you all asked me to be on this podcast, so this chapter is just too really amazing. But I like Mike, how you say that this second half of life is often us going back to healing because this is what Richard writes. This is why I love this chapter. Actually, even if *The Cloud* wasn't quoted in it, this is my favorite chapter of this book. Because he says in it, "In the second half of life, we can give our energy to making even the painful parts and formerly excluded parts belong to the now unified field, especially people who are different and those who never had a chance."

So I would say those people and also those people inside of me. So the people in me like that. I don't have to be perfect. I mean, not only do I not have to be, but how did I think I could be? Why would that be good? And how as a human being, how did that become the point, really?

And then he also in this chapter gave my suffering meaning because he says, "We must go through a necessary complexity, perhaps another term for necessary suffering to return to any second simplicity." So Richard just gave me to go back to Paul's, an annual and a safe

container. He gave me this way of looking at my past, my present, and how I could walk into the future. And literally, I want to say he actually took what I had been translating in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is that contemplation is love, it's resting in wordless, imageless love. And he made it visible, even more visible in how I could walk that path. So he literally made *The Cloud of Unknowing* even more visible for me. I'm very grateful.

Paul Swanson: You remind me, I'm sure I've shared this quote before, but it's one of my favorites. And it connects to this from Oliver Wendell Holmes where he says, "For simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn't give a fig. But for simplicity on the other side of complexity I'd give my life." And what I love about that is simplicity's on both sides of complexity.

But what I hear you saying, part of the gift of this chapter is there's meaning that you bring back from the second simplicity that kind of washes over the first simplicity all the way through the complexity. And it's a movement of reintegration of all that you've experienced up to this point. And I can understand through everything you've been sharing about why this is your favorite chapter in this marvelous book. How are you living and experiencing second simplicity now in your current mode of life and how you're passing it on to others? Or is that something you're conscious of or is that something that-

Carmen Butcher: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Okay, go ahead. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Carmen Butcher: I love that Oliver Wendell Holmes quote. It says so much about the reintegration. So for me, reintegration means self-compassion and others' compassion. And one of the things for me is that I've become my own friend. This sounds like such the thing you should be taught in first grade, but I missed that lecture. Richard says in this chapter, he says, and this is one of my favorite quotes ever, "I don't need to push the river as much now or own the river or get everybody in my precise river. Nor do others have to name the river the same way I do in order for me to trust them or their goodwill. It takes lots of drowning in our own too tiny river to get to this big and good place."

And so for me, it's like not beating myself up over what's happened. Make amends best I can, move forward into the joy of knowing and experiencing. You know how when you have a baby come into your life, you read the books about changing diapers and how it all works, and then the baby comes and it doesn't match the book. I don't care how good the book is, do you know? And you can hear about self-compassion. You can hear about love, the love of God. But really knowing I don't need to push the river. I am the river. I am the love of God and I'm loved. And that no matter, as Jim says, so inimitably, no matter what comes my way, God is with me in it no matter how painful, no matter how joyful, God is with me.

Mike Petrow: I love that. I love that. I love that. I love that. And I also love the notion of reading the book and then the life experience doesn't match the book. And so we're a couple episodes into this season and we're a couple chapters into *Falling Upward*. So even in that and thinking about *Falling Upward*, we don't want to turn *Falling Upward* into a roadmap that doesn't quite fit with our lived experience where like, I'm supposed to be in the first half of life right now. I'm supposed to be in the second half of life.

So I think about the great invitation and even thinking about this schema through the lens of a second simplicity. So I'd love to ask both of you, Paul, you too. So how, Carmen starting with you having read the chapter, it's your favorite chapter. You've integrated it to a degree that is wild. What is second simplicity? What do those words mean to you?

Carmen Butcher: Second simplicity is as much as possible living in this moment. So it's listening to you, Mike, listening to Paul, knowing that Corey is there keeping everything running with such joy and intelligence and kindness. And it's just being in this moment. And that is the thing. Can I explain it? No, absolutely not. That's it. And I think of Richard, he talks about simplicity means one fold. So it is that oneness. So it's also being with everybody listening into the podcast. Isn't that odd? Because they're not listening right now, but they are. So it's really this mystery, isn't it, of oneness. Yeah. Just holding into that.

Mike Petrow: You just made me accidentally make a connection between podcast recording and prayer. Of that notion of something you do that's intimate and personal, but also connected to a bunch of people who are there but not there. Wild.

Paul Swanson: That mystical podcasting.

Mike Petrow: Wow. Wow. Paul, what do you think second simplicity is?

Paul Swanson: Well, I'm going to just back up for a second about something you all said about creating a roadmap out of Falling Upward. I think that's so wise. I'm reminded of a story by Anthony DeMello where he talks in some parable where he tells a story about this map that can lead you to a certain kind of euphoric place or a place of union. And how so often we'll just frame the map and we'll put on the wall and talk about what a great map it is. But to actually go on the adventure. The map can be useful, but it's not everything. And I feel that's very similar with Falling Upward.

And I think that's true with second simplicity. I mean, my own sense of understanding is it is immersive in the moment. It's paying attention to what is before me. And I feel like for me, my children are my career as teachers in that of when they spark a sense of aliveness and immersion into what is happening right now. Not the ways that I can use my brain to try to think forward in the future or get mad about something in the past. It's the joyful, pleasant presence of the present tense.

And I actually just felt like I witnessed this in a film. I don't know if you all have seen Perfect Days, it's a Wim Wenders movie. But it's about a man in Tokyo who cleans toilets. And you watch him go through his days and he's so attentive. He takes pride in his work. He loves the shadows, the movement of trees. And as we're talking about this, I keep having this image of him in that film where it's just this, he embodies the second simplicity. And I can tell I'm not there because I'm using a lot of words to talk about second simplicity, but I can feel myself moving deeper and deeper in that invitation of trying to embody that second simplicity in myself.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh.

Paul Swanson: How about you, Mike?

Mike Petrow: Yeah, you just threw me into a bunch of different thoughts. I think about, for some reason I'm thinking of something, I think it's Joseph Campbell who says that when we look at scriptures and myths and sacred texts and wisdom, we're like people who go to a restaurant and try to eat the menu instead of using the menu to order food. Right?

Paul Swanson: That's great.

Mike Petrow: And I wonder, it's funny to me to think we could do the same thing with Falling Upward, right? Falling Upward could be another menu that we're trying to eat. I think about Joseph Campbell. I think a lot of people are trying to eat the menu of The Hero's Journey instead of just kind of taking the adventure of their life.

But the second simplicity, well, I'll say that. I'll tell a different story. I'm just going to ramble, should not be new for our listeners. I think about also a professor of mine who told a story of deconstructing all these theories about religious education. He was a professor of Hindu studies. And he said at a certain point in his life, he said, "I'd studied everything there was. I'd had this huge robust academic understanding of the technicality and the psychology of religion." And he said it had taken him completely out of a place of belief. But he realized that he missed praying. And he said, "I don't know how to pray because I don't believe in dialogic discursive prayer anymore," but I missed it.

So then he thought, "Well, what if I just chose to live as if it was true, but I don't need a reason. I don't need it to actually be true and I'm just going to engage in the activity because I want to engage in the activity." And then he and I had that conversation. And he's like, "I've been doing that for the last 15 years and prayer makes my life a lot better." And that sort of notion of living in the as if where I am neither beholden to those maps literally, nor do I need to throw them away either. I don't know if any of that makes sense. That's kind of my free associative ramble on all of that.

Carmen Butcher: It makes absolutely beautiful sense because staying open to not having preconceptions to how life really is and to the openness. Because I love how you said, "We're not going to eat the menu." And Paul, you're saying we're not going to put the map on the wall. And this is what this chapter does for me.

Because at the beginning of it, Richard talks about Ken Wilber's being trans rational and how true religious experience is trans rational. And it is human. So in other words, they're the things we can't explain that happen to us as Jim says, so very often. And that's not pre rational. It's not extra terrestrial. It's like being human. And I crave that openness. I love what you all have shared. I'm going to try not to eat any menus going forward, just food.

Mike Petrow: Great.

Paul Swanson: Just food only the food. As you're talking, I'm think about how we can't reason our way to love. We can't reason our way to mystery. It's both these things that we talk about falling into. And I think this part of what this chapter epitomizes for me is it's that falling into this greater mystery, and there's a bunch of ways we can reason ourself into the complexity of life, but it's the falling out of that complexity into this simplicity. Which doesn't, again, doesn't remove the complexity, but kind of brings with it this wash again that I just keep having these visuals of just this swirl of complexity and simplicity going back over each, like a wave

kind of crashing in on itself.

Mike Petrow: I wonder too about how much humor plays a part in this. This is not going to sound funny. This is heavy. I think about the most honest prayer I've ever prayed in my life. When I got the news that my mom was dying and then I ended up at her bedside and-

Got the news that my mom was dying and then I ended up at her bedside and it was real. I could look at it right away, I was like, "Oh yeah, this is it. This is it, this is worse than they told me." And I remember I prayed the most honest prayer I've ever prayed in my entire life where I said, "God, I don't have a thing to say to you right now." You know the story, I lost my brother and other things. And I was like, "So I'm mad at you, one.

Two, I don't even believe in prayer, I don't believe in dialogic spoken prayer and I'm not sure I believe in God. Three, I really need help. I don't know how to do this without praying," right? So there was this intensity of the moment where it was like, "All right, I'm going to let go of my intellectual take on this and just go towards what I need." At the same time not long after, I'm not going to lie, going through this unbelievably intense experience there was this humorous eye roll where I was like, "And here I am going through a major life crisis and now I'm going to rediscover my faith just like everybody else does."

And there's this sort of, in the intensity of that, in the moment of looking at the ducks in the intellectual stuff, the connection we make between it, is there a playfulness I wonder, that just makes space for all of that? I'm asking both of you specifically because you embody that to me, both of you.

Carmen Butcher: Well, see this story that you tell, Mike, touches me so deeply because what I hear in that prayer, in that existential moment, is honesty. Just absolute unvarnished, being in the moment of now honesty. And if that's not prayer, even if you hadn't got to the third one, do you understand?

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Carmen Butcher: Of, I need your help. That to me is the thing because it's relationship. It really is. And so yeah, and I think definitely talking with ducks is a form of prayer. I do, I actually really do.

Mike Petrow: Ducks are so great.

Carmen Butcher: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: What do you think, Paul?

Paul Swanson: Now, I'm just thinking about ducks. I mean, they're awesome. I'm not sure if this is going to answer it, but what's been coming to mind for me in the relationship to the humor aspect of it and this is something I feel like I share with both of you, where we can be in the trenches of a very deep conversation or a hard place or looking at some of the brutalities of life and then a joke comes in out of nowhere and it allows for all of reality to be held in that same space. And to me that is the sign of, well, this person will be my friend because we can joke and cry together.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: And I can't help but think that, for me, I feel like half of my prayers to God are jokes like, "This is really funny," or "Here's this observation of life that draws me in to laugh at reality to keep from crying for that moment." Or to be able to cry with reality as I see what's happening in Haiti or when I see what's happening in Gaza, what I see what's happening in Ukraine. These things, I need humor to help me hold both the joy and the suffering in what's happening. And to me, there's something about not being so brutally dualistic in the midst of what's happening as the way ... It's also survival. It's a survival skill.

Mike Petrow: That's so good. There's a laughter that's denial and then there's a laughter that you have to laugh. Alan Watts talks about this at one point. He says, "There has to be joy hidden in every moment because there's so much suffering in the world that if there isn't joy, then everything's damned." Still thinking about Joseph Campbell, Joseph Campbell says at one point, "We don't need a meaning for our life. We just need an experience of being alive."

And I wonder if part of what you're talking about, part of what it was like to experience this, what you said, Carmen, is letting ourselves live in a place of almost undefended honesty about what is. And this is now making me understand why Second Simplicity would connect to your translation of the Cloud of unknowing, Carmen. And is there something about ... Is this what the cloud is?

Carmen Butcher: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Taking us to a place of just being in it?

Carmen Butcher: Yes. I mean literally, if you go to Chapter Six of the Cloud, because it's a dialogue between a teacher and anonymous and a 24-year-old directee and he says, "I know you'll ask me, how do I think on God is God and who is God?" And I can only answer, "I don't know." And then he goes on to talk about how we can explore, our minds can understand, but God can only be embraced by love. And so there's this unknowing, like this letting go ... To get back to the Simplicity book where I first met Richard. It's this letting go.

Because I can only take in the blessings of love and my essence if my hands are open as long as I'm grasping and attached, I just can't. So it's this letting go, this unknowing. And I do think also, I've heard Richard speak about this. He'd say, he used to think he needed to fix everything or something like that, it's not exact quote. But that feeling that I've had, I think most people have had of like, "Why can't I do more? I can't fix this."

And that what you're talking about Paul, where you have some jokes with God in the sense of like, "I'm maxed out here with sheer heartbreak for people in Gaza," or just whatever it is. And you have this conversation with God and you have to unknow and then do what you can do. That to me is the thing, I can do some small things right where I am. And I do want to say, it seems to me that part of the Second Simplicity is trying to eat well and drink water and go for walks and be kind to others around you.

I mean, these things you learned in kindergarten. Do you know what I'm saying? Just there's this thing of, I keep reminding myself, are you taking care? Are you trying to sleep? And I have insomnia, but am I working on it? Life is never going to be perfect, but am I trying

to do my best by this gift? Because it is such a gift and it's not a dress rehearsal. So am I doing right by this gift, not putting the map on the wall. I'll never forget that, Paul. Am I not putting the map on the wall and saying, "I went there once." But staying open to not knowing. Yeah, you're right, Mike.

Paul Swanson: I'm trying to remember this quote about the hallmark of all deep truth is that the negation of that deep truth is also a deep truth.

Mike Petrow: Oh, wow.

Paul Swanson: I think about that with what you're talking about with unknowing. Knowing helps us get on the way. It is so useful. And then if it's not undergirded by unknowing and a sense of releasement to that, it's hard to grow up. It's hard to deepen into this relationship with the most noble unknowable of God. I'm just struck by the way we kind of keep swirling around that. I had also the thought, too, when you were talking about going to the outside spaces and the things that we learned in kindergarten.

But what I've also heard is as we seek out these spaces of containers in wild places, but we bring the wildness with us, it's not safe. But yet it's also safe because of that deep recognition of being a part of the fabric of the Universe. And so to hear you bring that up again, I went right back to when we opened this conversation of holding the wildness and the safety of being in nature and our own spot in it and how we can't help but see the reality of nature embracing both the wildness and the shelter.

Mike Petrow: I love that. I love that. And I think it's why I love to be outside so much. And we're recording this episode in the midst of a ridiculous windstorm to pass New Mexico. I'm waiting for a cow to blow by in the window, but there is something ... I'll go out and run in it later. There's something beautiful about this and what I hear you describing, Carmen, about your time in the marsh, that's such a gift. Thanks for that, Paul.

Carmen Butcher: Yeah, I agree with both of you. And just the fact of when you can go out on any day and look up and there's the sky. There's something about that. That's what Richard says is in the Second Simplicity. Whenever it happens, you have this experience of just breathing is enough. Like, that's amazing. And you really do sink into it. So I'm really grateful for those moments when we can go out in nature and just wherever we are, if it's just a tree in a city and look up. So, yeah. Wow, ya'll said so many things.

Mike Petrow: I mean, we're just riffing off your brilliant coat tails. Seriously. Well, and on that note, I love that you pointed out that the cloud is a dialogue. I'm thinking about, in this, there's a section where Richard talks about making space for anxiety and doubt. He says, "I don't actually trust believers who don't have a little bit of it and yet we make space for wonder." And what I find myself thinking about now, were a couple episodes into the podcast.

Carmen, you're a huge part of our Essentials of Engage Contemplation Course in the living school. And I think 85% of the teaching in that course is done as conversations. It's conversations back and forth between teachers, between teachers and students. It's been a great joy, Carmen, to work with you in a lot of those conversations. And we talk about the importance of dialogue over definition and exploration over explanation.

But sitting here in this brilliant conversation, learning with the two of you, I wonder, is conversation the container that makes space for our curiosity and lets us hold the anxiety and the doubt and the wonder? Carmen, how is conversation a place that lets us live in Second Simplicity as opposed to say like instruction or a list of rules and precepts or even philosophies to live by.

Carmen Butcher: I love that. Conversation is the container that holds our curiosity that allows us to get past a list of instructions. I love it. Just exactly the way you said it because for me, I try to teach conversation with my students, model it. First of all, listening. We often do a few exercises where we talk about, listening is hard. Do you know? Like, really deep listening. And I don't mean hard as in you regret it or it's painful or something like that, but it takes real effort. And it's not like you just turn up and listen necessarily, you have to actually be mindful about it and all of that.

So by heart, I mean good, but paying attention. What you talked about earlier, Paul. And I think conversation because I love the word converse because the verse part is also in universe and it means to turn. And since uni is one turning, converse is turning with, so it's like we're dancing. So I'm listening to you two, you are listening to me. You're saying incredibly amazingly kind things that I'm going to have to sit with about me.

And we're trying to really bring meaning to our lives, I think, in the sense of turning up for each other and seeing each other and seeing ourselves in God. It's a mystery to me, but I love how you said it, Mike. I can't really improve on it, but since you asked the question, I thought I should respond.

Mike Petrow: No. I'm literally, Carmen, trying to find words for why I enjoy learning from you and being in conversation with you so much. So thank you for that very generous feedback.

Paul Swanson: That was an incredible question. I mean, I think the way you phrased it and the way you responded to it, Carmen, it elevates even the purpose of this podcast. And the question itself is, we're a part of this great conversation throughout what we might call it a tradition, but it's the conversation that gets carried out and goes on sidetracks and comes back and expands and more folks get to join and some depart. I just think that's the gist of it. That's the joy of being on this path.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, that's so good. We work at this center for action and contemplation and I'm thinking that contemplation in action is rooted in a lot of conversation. And again, something I've learned from our conversations with Carmen in the living school is that contemplation. I used to think of contemplation as, it's getting quiet and it's getting alone. And it's interesting to think of that being in the service of contemplation is not deep ignoring, it's deep listening. It's deep listening to the sandhill cranes.

Carmen Butcher: Yeah, the sandhill cranes. The ducks, the sandhill cranes. I love that because it reminds me of when you sing in a choir and really and truly, you listen to others so that you balance, you're trying to listen to others. You're not just saying to yourself, "Am I singing well?" That's just not the point. You're trying to do your best to contribute to the melody and the harmony, but you are definitely listening to others watching the conductor. That to me is conversation, is you're really trying to elevate others divinity.

Paul Swanson: Carmen, this has been an amazing time. I'm kind of shocked how quickly this hour has passed. It does feel like we're a part of a choir and you are elevating our ability to harmonize. I'm going to take that metaphor with, because I am someone who loves music and loves to sing, but is not so great at it.

But I love this idea of, we're all participating in it together and how do we help balance that out? And I can't say it enough. Thank you so much for your presence and teaching. I love your books, but your presence exudes the wisdom that you have experienced and embodied over your journey. And thank you for teaching us by every word, indeed. Yeah, such a gift.

Mike Petrow: The notion of listening is a way to elevate others divinity. I am going to stay with that for a long time and really thank you for doing that for all of us. And I feel like for all our listeners too, because even as they're listening to this conversation, there's a listening in the presence that you bring that I think allows a lot of us to feel heard. Thank you so much.

Carmen Butcher: Thank you, Paul. Thank you, Mike. It's a joy, pure joy.

Paul Swanson: Lucky to be alive.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Also, get out there and find some ducks everybody. Ducks are awesome.

Mike Petrow: Oh, my gosh, Carmen's the best.

Paul Swanson: Simply the best.

Mike Petrow: I just cannot say enough good things. Also, really appreciated all the shout-outs for ducks in this episode.

Paul Swanson: I think it was the most shout-outs that ducks have received on any podcast.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Our listeners should know that Carmen being Carmen immediately put postcards in the mail for Paul and I, me getting a postcard with some ducks. You getting a postcard with some cranes. And on your postcard noted that the standout moment of the episode is Paul saying, "I'm more of a sandhill crane man myself."

Paul Swanson: There's some things you just have to be very clear about. And for me, that's sandhill cranes.

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious. What I love about Carmen is she's so brilliant and yet so effortlessly accessible and practical and real. We can have these beautiful conversations about language and mystics and history and then just the raw simplicity of seeing ducks and sandhill cranes and talking to the Divine, walking through a marsh. It doesn't get any more real than that.

Paul Swanson: You nailed it. I think because Carmen walks this path in every aspect of her life, whether she's teaching, writing, translating, writing postcards out with the ducks, she has to me, that kind of contemplative of gaze open to the world and is always seeking to interact and engage with whatever person, species, plant is before her. And it's contagious like her joy and that overflows from a brilliant mind and a way to simplify things so that you're what truly matters.

- Mike Petrow: Yeah. I'll add a stinger to the episode that's not in the episode. One of the things Carmen said once that blew my mind the most is she was talking about the word respect. And she said, "It's like ..." I can't do her voice. She said, "It's like from the word spectacles, but it's re so you look at something again. And when we respect something, we take another look at it to see even more deeply what's there." And that's what I love about this whole approach to Second Simplicity is acknowledging the things that we're being called back to in our life to look at again and in their simplicity, to let them become revelations and become new for us.
- Paul Swanson: That's it. And I think you just said it so well. And Carmen teases us up for this, of where do we need to bring these eyes of Second Simplicity back into our life?
- Mike Petrow: It's a good prompt to leave with our audience. What's coming alive again? What's shimmering for you right now? Where's the duck in your world?
- 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. Everything Belongs is made possible, thanks to the generosity of our supporters and the shared work of-
- Crew: Mike Petro, Paul Swanson, Jenna Kuyper, Izzy Spitz, Megan Hare, Sarah Palmer, Barb Lopez, 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.