



EVERYTHING BELONGS

Living on the Edge of the Inside
with Dr. Barbara Holmes

Paul Swanson: Hey, everyone. Welcome to the Everything Belongs Podcast where we seek to take the teachings of Father Richard and investigate how we can live them out in our own lives, in our own communities, our own realities.

Today I want to welcome one of our co-hosts, Drew Jackson, in the conversation as this whole entire episode focuses on chapter three of Eager to Love, Living on the Edge of the Inside, Simplicity and Justice.

First off, welcome Drew, and I would love to get your sense of how did this chapter resonate with you? What were some things that stuck out?

Drew Jackson: Hey, Paul? Yeah. This chapter, there's so much here. Eager To Love was actually the first book from Father Richard that I read ever-

Paul Swanson: Oh, really?

Drew Jackson: Yeah. And this chapter was one that really sat with me, really getting into this glimpse into Francis and Claire's life and their downward path and how that intersects with the vocation of doing justice in the world is something that really resonates deeply with me.

Paul Swanson: I love that. I think being introduced to Francis and Claire through Richard's writing and particularly this chapter, I think the edge of the inside, simplicity and justice within those very few words, there's a lot that is invoked.

Drew Jackson: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: There's a lot that's invited into, and there's so many just I feel like tethers within this chapter that ask me questions about how am I living? How am I following my own set, my own vocational call? How am I listening to the voices in the world beckon me to power, prestige, and privilege? And how am I seeking to follow the way of the spirit in a counter direction, yet still being embedded in that world?

I feel like it gets layered upon, layered upon layered. I love some of the ruminations that you had in our previous conversation. You're talking about the soft prophecy. How does that phrase that's in this chapter, and again folks, if you read this book, that's great. You don't have to read this book to listen to the podcast, but this is one of the themes of this chapter. And Drew, how does soft prophecy speak to you?

Drew Jackson: It's such a powerful idea and image and it's this idea that our way of life, a way of being in the world is itself a critique of the dominant systems and structures that are often oppressive in this world, and it's juxtaposed against the hard prophecy that often can come with against anti-energy.

And that soft prophecy is not so much focused on the hard verbal critiques, but is saying, I'm going to live differently as a way to critique the things that I see that are not right. And Francis and Claire in their lives are embodying that and inviting us into that way of being in the world.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I love that. That CAC tenet of the best critique of the bad is the practice of the better.

Drew Jackson: Yes.

Paul Swanson: And that is such an anchor point I feel like of the tenor of this chapter and what you just said in relationship to prophecy.

Drew Jackson: Absolutely. Absolutely. So we're going to have an opportunity to hear in this episode from Father Richard, see some conversation with you, Paul and Mike at the Hermitage, and then we'll have an opportunity to hear from Dr. Barbara Holmes later on. But we really hope you enjoy this episode and can sink into the richness of what this chapter has to offer.

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

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Drew Jackson: And I'm Drew Jackson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs. Richard, we are so excited to talk to you about chapter three, Living on the Edge of the Inside, Simplicity and Justice. I want to ask you, I think about young Richard Rohr, when do you think was the first time you encountered injustice in the world and you knew it was real?

Richard Rohr: There were two students in our grade school class, the only two who were not Catholic. They were probably no religion or maybe some denomination. And I remember being so impressed that the school let them come for no tuition. The tuition was only a dollar a month. How poor can you be?

And of course, it could be a dollar a month because the nuns all took a vow of poverty. Dollar a month, I went to grade school. God, but that these two outsiders were let in and we're on occasion reminded they were not Catholic. Of course, you're not Catholic, you can't do that or whatever. They never said it in a cruel way, but in a discriminating way.

Mike Petrow: Sure.

Richard Rohr: Both the creating of class and the simple attempts to undo it, the nuns taking them in and charging them nothing. That's my first memory. We had one Black or two Black students in grade school.

Mike Petrow: I remember a story that you shared with me once that I found so moving and I'm not going to have the details right, so help me out. But it was about your dad and there was-

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes.

Mike Petrow: Do you remember what I'm thinking about? Was that there was an apartment or a place-

Richard Rohr: He built it.

Mike Petrow: Oh, he built it?

Richard Rohr: My sister say the garage isn't there anymore in Ness City Kansas, he had a filling station and he built above it a little apartment, you couldn't even stand up in it, where he let Black

people sleep after dark in Western Kansas. At that point, Black people could not be in town after dark. Ain't that unbelievable?

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: The land of the free, the home of the brave. So he remembers telling them, "You better move on. It's getting dark." And usually that's what they'd do. If it was still four o'clock or something. But if it was too late, he'd let them sleep up there in a little bed he had prepared overnight. Then once it got light in the morning, they could head on their way.

Mike Petrow: So he would warn people that it wasn't safe for them after dark and if it didn't look like they were going to be able to get to safety, he gave them somewhere-

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Mike Petrow: ... private and tucked away to spend the night where they would be safe.

Richard Rohr: My father was a simple man, really. Not edgy. He went to the first grade twice, the second grade twice, the third grade twice, and the fourth grade twice.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: He failed every one. And on his birthday in the fourth grade, it made him old enough by the rules of the state of Kansas to get out of school and he raised his hand. We checked this. "Is this true daddy?" "Yeah. That's what I did."

And he said, "Sister, I am..." what would he be? 14, I think. He had to be. "I'm 14 today and the rules of Kansas say you don't have to go to school until after your 14, so thank you very much, but I'm going home to work on the farm." He ended up working on the farm on this gas station down the road.

Mike Petrow: And everything you've just said, what a beautiful example of simplicity and justice. I mean, what a Franciscan notion too-

Richard Rohr: And he never knew.

Mike Petrow: What did that teach you as a young person growing up about giving hospitality to the stranger...

Richard Rohr: I told that sermon, I was in the pulpit in my home parish in Topeka at their 50th wedding anniversary and he sat there, he'd always listen to everything I said. And I don't know how I told him, but I said, "And daddy, is that story true?" He put his head down, and shook it. He was crying. I could tell he was crying.

Mike Petrow: That's beautiful.

Richard Rohr: But he nodded. It was true. I said, "You're as much a social justice advocate as Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day," who were big in the '70s. This was the '70s. No. We had a dear daddy.

Paul Swanson: I love the way you talk about your dad and even calling him daddy, the sweetness.

Richard Rohr: Daddy. He told us that at a certain when... It must have been Carroll turned 14, he said, "No, you don't start calling me dad. You call me daddy." And I was standing, "Okay. We'll call you daddy." We all four did. Yeah. Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Paul Swanson: No. That's it. I love that we're invoking your daddy into this conversation, simplicity and justice.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Well, you're a daddy. You understand.

Paul Swanson: And I think as we think about living the edge of the inside, which it sounds like your daddy certainly did that.

Richard Rohr: He really did without knowing he was doing it. It was so unconscious. I don't think he would ever consciously hurt anybody, anybody.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. In this particular chapter, you take these themes of simplicity and justice and you talk about the soft prophecy of Franciscanism.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: I love that combo. And then you say it leads to a holy foolishness. What do you think simplicity and justice have to do with becoming a holy fool? How do these things work together?

Richard Rohr: You're not concerned about looking cool and current and up to date in Kansas City. You got to get rid of that garbage. The need to look like you're one of the enlightened ones. I remember one of those two Protestants, the boy was Dennis Comer and I sort took him under my wing. I can remember walking to school with him and I say to myself, "Now, how did I learn to do that?" I knew he was poorer than we were. I knew he was rejected by a lot because he wasn't Catholic. He wasn't in the majority. Why am I telling you this? Is that a response to-

Paul Swanson: We're talking about simplicity and justice and-

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah.

Paul Swanson: ... the path of the holy fool and how disregarding whatever school and popular-

Richard Rohr: Has to be willing to not look current and cool by establishment standards.

Paul Swanson: Which is a major sin in our culture to not look current or cool.

Mike Petrow: Oh, my gosh.

Richard Rohr: Oh, the whole way we are.

Mike Petrow: I love our friend, Belden Lane, talks about the desert fathers and mothers concept of apatia. It sounds like apathy, but it is not caring. It's not caring about what doesn't

matter so we can care about what does. What he opened my eyes to is recognizing that apatia is activism and he says it's dangerously subversive to not care about what the culture tells you to care about and to care about things that we understand matter more. And I hear a bit of the holy fool in that.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: That's pretty cool.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Definitely.

Paul Swanson: And I think it makes your yeses and nos a lot simpler too.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: If you know what you're about, you're not saying yes to things of little consequence or little meaning because it's become a lot clearer to this path of the holy fool of what you actually want to engage with, support, serve, love. It's no longer what's the crowd say? What's the group say?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: And we see that in Jesus too, right? I mean, Jesus is always the crowd, the massification of the thinking is always what he's... Almost like counter-cultural too.

Mike Petrow: Oh, my gosh.

Paul Swanson: And Francis embodies that in his time and culture and that feels like part of what I see in this chapter is invite us into is where is that edge for each person?

Mike Petrow: Well, I think about that story in the Gospels where Jesus really, really angers the crowd and it says the mob grabs him and they want to throw him off a cliff, and then it says, "But he just passed right through them."

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: Isn't it such a living metaphor of all that pressure coming at us, trying to push us towards destruction and we just walk right through it?

Richard Rohr: The tradition of the holy fool was much more honored and developed in Orthodox Eastern Christianity. Francis was a new manifestation in the West.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: We were Romanized, which was loving the top, loving the power, loving position.

Mike Petrow: I love that. And what's intriguing to me too is the holy fool's courage to go against the mainstream, also means that there's an innovation and a creativity. The holy fool is always a little bit reinventing-

Richard Rohr: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Mike Petrow: ... which Francis certainly did. You have this great paragraph that wraps up this chapter.

Richard Rohr: let me hear it if that's great.

Mike Petrow: Oh, so good. This is how you close out the thought on this. With that, we must move to the laboratory where all such radical change can occur. The laboratory inside of our very mind, heart, and the cells of our body, I call it the laboratory of contemplative practice, which rewires our inner life and actually confirms in the soul a kind of emotional sobriety, plus an inner sense of divine union so we can do the needed works of justice with both peace and enduring passion.

This is one of my favorite things you've ever said. Paul can attest to this. I love talking about the contemplative laboratory of our lives. We talk about it in how we educate. We talk about it in how we think of CAC.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: But I love this notion when we think of a lab, I can't help but think of a wizard or an alchemist who's down in the laboratory building on ancient wisdom to invent new things. Richard, how does this invite our readers and our listeners and our leaders.

Paul Swanson: And our leaders, yeah.

Mike Petrow: Into entering the contemplative laboratory and doing the work to experiment with their practice, but also how they show up for justice in the world?

Richard Rohr: How does what?

Mike Petrow: How does this thought of envisioning our life as a contemplative laboratory?

Richard Rohr: Laboratory. Well, laboratory gives you room for trial and error, instead of just there's one perfect way and I've got it and I'm giving it to you. That's not a laboratory.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: There's no trial and error. How do we know this is the perfect way? See, there's where you have to have the Protestant pushback against the Catholic order saying, "How do we know this saves people?" You need order with disorder.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: The critique of the sacrosanct order and when you could do both, eventually, you can start there. Do both of them with love, both the placement of the order, the offering of the disorder with love. You've got the whole picture.

Mike Petrow: God, that's so helpful. I just need... Wow. Thinking about in our practice being given

guidelines, but having permission to try and see what works in our action to recognize that some of our best intentions, sometimes our intention and our impact don't line up and recognizing that we have permission to experiment, recognize what's not working. Try again, try again, try again.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yeah. Yes. Yes.

Paul Swanson: I'm struck by how we keep coming back to the primacy of love as the sphere to live in.

Richard Rohr: Great.

Paul Swanson: And the freedom that exists there, to experiment in love, contemplation, and action because there's no fear of not being good enough like when you're in that space.

Richard Rohr: Very nice.

Paul Swanson: It's the freedom of love.

Richard Rohr: It's a laboratory of love.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Knowing we'll do it wrong before we... Many times before we do it right? Yeah.

Mike Petrow: Wow. God, that's where I want to live is in the laboratory of love.

Richard Rohr: Well, you both do already.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard. This has been-
We're going to end on the laboratory of love.

Richard Rohr: Oh, okay.

Paul Swanson: It brings together so much what we've been talking about-

Mike Petrow: We're not going to top that.

Paul Swanson: ... this chapter and we invite everyone listening to join us in the laboratory of love to experiment and join what God is up to.

Richard Rohr: You pull it down to me. God is good.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard.

Mike Petrow: Everything belongs will continue in a moment.

Drew Jackson: Hey, everyone, as we welcome you back, we will be in conversation with Dr. Barbara Holmes. Dr. Barbara Holmes is a scholar of African American spirituality and mysticism. Dr. Barbara Holmes reveals how the cosmos can expand our limited constructs of religion, race, and power. As faculty at the Center for Action and Contemplation, she teaches how God's

communal presence can inspire imagination and wisdom, especially in times of crisis.

She's the author of *Race and the Cosmos*, *Joy Unspeakable* and *Crisis Contemplation*, and she hosts CAC sister podcast, *The Cosmic We*. We hope you enjoy this next part of our episode.

Paul Swanson: Dr. B, thank you so much for being here today on the podcast, *Everything Belongs*. Here with Drew and I as we talk about chapter three of *Eager to Love*. We could be more thrilled than to talk to you today about this chapter. We're going to kick it off with a question on just very basic on Francis and Claire. We would love to know when were you first introduced to Francis or Claire or Franciscanism. Do you remember how they first came into your orbit?

Barbara Holmes: Only vaguely during seminary because I went to Columbia Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian seminary. So when I took a course called *Mary, Mystics and Martyrs* Claire and St. Francis came in, but only obliquely. We were mainly focused on Mary.

Paul Swanson: Do you remember your first impressions of just whether it was hearing about their lifestyle or just the weird little brown robes they wore? Did anything come to mind in certain images?

Barbara Holmes: Yes. Absolutely. As an African American woman, once you're traumatized by racism in this nation, you don't think of yourself as going downward as Christic mobility. You're climbing upward. You're trying to divest yourself of the trauma of oppression.

And so the only antidote to the trauma of oppression is success, ego, work, and that's what you do. Your ladder climb to nowhere. And so to think of someone giving it all up, even though you know they didn't suffer that particular oppression but had the oppression of wealth, which in and of itself can be an oppression and they reject that wealth, that would seem to be the key to everything that all of us are seeking and put on brown robes and walk the streets and talk to the animals. And you just wonder, what is it that allows you to make that kind of choices?

Drew Jackson: Dr. B, what you're naming is this practice, this way of simplicity that was talked about so much in this chapter, and Father Richard talks about it as not only a way of life but as an act of freedom. And it's one thing to hear about simplicity in the lives of Francis and Claire who Father Richard calls two dropouts from 13th century Assisi society.

And it's one thing to hear about simplicity from those who have lived in the monastic life. But what about for people like you and so many of us who are still within society, connected to institutions, is simplicity possible for us? If so, how? What does that look like and why is it even important?

Barbara Holmes: I quickly said yes because it can be done but only in a modicum. And by modicum, I mean, you have to carve out space for it. You have to be intentional about it because those of us who are young enough have to work. You have to work because of the systems, the economic systems in this country.

And so you don't get a chance to really think about what simplicity means until you retire. And so, yes, I carved out spaces for it. I, for instance, primarily buy my clothes in thrift

stores or in the other kinds of stores where they've been used before. I recycle. I don't need new things. Most of my furniture came from the thrift store, so you can rob me. I don't care.

The only thing new is the television. I've always lived that way. My children shop in thrift stores now. And they go, "Ma, I mean, why am I doing this?" I said, "Because we lived in thrift stores." There's a way in which you can live below the economy, within an economy you have to be in but below it. You do not have to chase what they're asking you to chase.

And they're asking you to chase new cars, new iPhone, new this, new that, you can carve out freedom and simplicity by refusing to enter the race for nothing. You are spending your energy and your life, burning yourself out for things that break and don't last. That hardly seems worth it.

Most of the things that we're working for are worthless. You're never going to pay your house off. If you do before you die, you can't take it with you. So wouldn't it be better to spend your time doing something else? And I think the key to it is because in the beginning when I was younger, I thought the key was to fight the systems that be, fight the powers that be. What is that? Who is that rapper who says that? I can't remember.

Drew Jackson: Public Enemy.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Public Enemy. Yeah. Fight the powers that be and that's what I did. But that's useless. All you have to do is not participate. And in many of the countries they stopped using these banks that are exploitive. They just started their own economic systems. They started building tiny houses instead of getting into these huge mansions you had to pay for forever. There are ways that you can drop out. And even in this society, you don't have to be part of it. You can be in it but not of it.

Drew Jackson: At what point did that begin to really dawn on you that that is the way to freedom? And how did that really dawn on you and really take hold in your heart?

Barbara Holmes: It dawned on me when I graduated from law school, and before that I had been a professional actor. Suddenly I'm divorced and I've got two children to raise. And so that's not going to be what I'm going to be doing, playing around on stages every couple of weeks.

So that was subsidized by a doctor I was married to. So now I actually have to grow up and get a job. And as it happened in the ways that God wills, I was in a production *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Was ENUF* by Ntozake Shange.

And there was a dispute between the actors and labor and they asked me to represent them and I did and I liked it. And then some other actors asked me to represent them in disputes. And I did and I liked it. And I decided I would go to law school.

And as I told Paul the other day, I sent them a headshot. Your application has to have a picture. And I sent them a boobalicious headshot because that's all I had. And the dean called me up and said, "We want you to come in as soon as you can. We want to meet who would send us a picture like this?"

So I went and as it turned out, they fully scholarship in which was necessary because I was not working. And I took my two kids and we went to law school. And when I graduated and went into a integrated, now this is in the '80s. I'm in integrating something in Atlanta, no Black lawyers anywhere.

And so I go into this huge Anglo law firm and I took a look at the partners, the ones who were making a million plus. They were sick. They were alcoholic. They were broken. They were mocked by the younger partners. It was abysmal. The work was tedious and dreadful.

I guess I thought I was going to be Thurgood Marshall, but that's not what happens when you get out of law school, you do tedious jobs at the bottom of the ranks. Okay?

Okay. Fine. I'll do the tedious jobs, but what are these tedious jobs leading toward? They're leading toward brokenness. And I'm looking at these broken men, I don't want that. If this is where the money leads, I don't want that. And so I left that huge law firm in Atlanta and went to Macon Georgia and went into a southern general law firm. I thought a smaller place, smaller town where I had gone to law school would be better. It was worse.

And one day I was in my office and I said, "This is not it." And I started crying. I'm standing in the middle of my office and I started crying. And so pretty much, as I've written in my memoir, I let the law firm know that I wasn't interested in their slip and fall cases. I let the gentleman know that I was dating, that I had less than normal interest in him.

I let go of it all. I quit. I just quit. And I took my kids and I went back to my mom's house in Atlanta and I didn't know what to do. And so I stayed at my mom's house and my sister lived there too, in Atlanta, not in her house, but one day she came over and she said, "Get out of bed. We're going over to Morehouse. We're going over to see if we can find something for you to do other than be depressed."

And she took me over to the theology school there and nobody would speak to us. They were too busy. We had an appointment but something had happened. And so my sister said, "There's a little school near mom's house. Let's go over there." Well, it turned out that that little school was Columbia Theological Seminary.

I walked in there and they said, "Oh, you want to go to law school?" And I went, "Not really." And my sister said, "Yeah. She does." "You want to go to theology school?" I said, "No." And my sister said, "Yes, she does."

And so they offered me a full scholarship if all I would do, because they were impressed by my background as an attorney. And they said, "We'll give you a full scholarship to theology school if you'll come to Hebrew this summer, take your class and come in the fall." Well, I didn't do it.

And in September they called me and said, "Why didn't you come?" And I said, "What about no money did you not understand? I told you I had no money, not some money, no money, and you asked me to pay for a class, I have no money, so I went home."

They said, "Oh, for heaven's sakes." And they put me in class right away, took care of all the Hebrew and stuff, and I doubled up on my language classes and graduated and got another

scholarship to Vanderbilt. So all along the way, spirit was opening a path to something that I could not even have imagined, I had not thought of. But at Columbia there was a woman waiting. There's always somebody on your path toward where you're supposed to go who's there waiting for you.

They have been put there for you. They think they have a job. They stay there for a while, maybe quit, but they were there for you. When you came through they were there. And there was a Black female professor there who was one of the founders of the womanist movement in theology. And she swept me up and mentored me and prepared me. And so doors began to open.

I mean, it is amazing what spirit does when you let go of what you think you need. I thought I needed money. I let go, quit, have no job. I thought I needed to be an attorney to impress somebody, to teach my doctor husband a lesson. Look at me. And I let go of everything and became nothing.

And when I was able to say, "This is no longer in my hands. I can no longer carve or create a reality of my own. I don't know what comes next, but I'll walk by faith." And it wasn't all religious like that. It wasn't like, "Oh, Jesus, lead me a path." It wasn't that.

It was that you breathe, you keep living and you allow the spirit to open away for you. Sometimes it's in a mighty just shocking thing, but usually it's quiet and progressive. And so that's what happened.

Paul Swanson: The thing that lands for me... Thank you for sharing that Dr. B, is the way of simplicity is not simple. You can be led by the spirit and the pathway may be one of simplicity where you are looking at all the signposts, like this is not where I'm supposed to be. This is not who I want to be like and make these choices, but they are not simple.

And I think that is something that I think gets lost in the conversation around simplicity is there's some real consequences to following the spirits promptings in your life and it will lead you to more openness and more generativity and your participation and your calling. But it doesn't mean there'll be rose petals leading you along the way. Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Right.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Drew Jackson: And one of the things I hear Paul too, is that as we opt into this way of letting go and not engaging in the rat race and the climb higher, that there will be people along the way, community along the way that's going to support us as we walk that journey. So even if we're not making a monastic vow and living in community with other brothers and sisters, there is community to support us in this way of being in the world.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. I knew I was in the right place because there was that community. There wasn't hierarchy. That I'd always experienced hierarchy in everything you do, in your jobs, and we would go to the American Academy of Religion and you might be sitting next to Cornel West or James Cone, you would be talking to Emily Towns. These folks who did not consider themselves to be above you, to be community, and they would mentor you,

they would talk to you, they would guide you, they would read your transcripts, they would recommend you to book publishers. It was total support and it still is that way.

We didn't compete with each other. I remember there was an opening at Boston University for a job, and we all happened to be there because of a conference. And I went in and said, "No. I think Dr. Riggs would be better for this job than I am." And somebody else said, "No. We think Dr. Fluker would be better." We didn't compete for the same positions. We knew who could do what. And there are plenty of jobs. You don't have to battle with each other. You can support each other, recommend each other, lift each other up.

Paul Swanson: That's a great example of what the body of Christ should be where it's celebrating one other's gifts and not competing over being the left elbow or whatever the body part may be, but really seeing the one body coming together.

Dr. B, one thing that I noticed about this chapter, it's one of the shortest ones in the book, and as I was thinking about that, I was thinking, "Well, it's because living on the edge of the inside is not a very popular place to be, so it's not going to be the longest chapter."

And so when I think of mystics, [inaudible 00:38:53], movement leaders like Francis and Claire, there's an intuition that the edge is where the freedom is. And then there's the inside and if you can stomach it or able to survive there, that's a place of leverage.

How do you see the mystics? I think you've shared some through your story, but how do you see mystics and prophets operating at this place of the edge of the inside for the betterment of the world, for the betterment of a movement, for the betterment of community?

Barbara Holmes: I think that Father Richard says it best. What does he call it, soft prophecy? Even when we were teaching in the living school the prophetic way, I don't think we talked about that very much. And if we extend it, I would love to delve more into this soft prophecy because having gone through Pentecostal charismatic tent movement ministries, the kind of prophecy that I was always used to is hard prophecy.

We followed a guy who called himself the prophet. He had a staff in his hand. He would lift it, he would prophesy, and it was always doom, disaster.

Father Richard's talking about something completely different when he talks about a soft prophecy. That's what living peace and being peace means. The soft prophecy is people able to read your life. You don't have to raise the staff and prophesy pain and suffering. There's enough of that in the world.

And I don't put the tent ministries down and I don't ignore the power that they have because I've seen too much in those ministries and some of these doom ministries, the leaders of them had real power.

My son to this day will not go to anywhere near a church because of what happened in the tent ministry and poor baby, he was a teenager and the prophet lifted his staff over the teens and prophesied whatever he was prophesying over them and they all fell simultaneously.

You'd have to see it to understand it. It was like cards falling and my son was there and he

couldn't walk anymore. And he crawled to me saying, "Mom. Mom. Mom." And I said, "Calm down. Just calm down. Spirit was at work and we don't know how spirit manifests."

After that he sat on the hill about half a mile from the tent when he recovered. They do have power. Doom has power. Prophecy of suffering has power, but it doesn't have the depth and sustaining power of soft prophecy.

Drew Jackson: Speaking of soft prophecy, I was thinking about that a lot as I was reading this chapter and the quote Father Richard says of soft prophecy that the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better, which I love that.

Paul Swanson: Oh my goodness.

Drew Jackson: It's so good. But I was thinking about a lot of us who are passionate about engaging and critiquing, which there are necessary critiques of institutions, be it the church or healthcare system, political institutions, policing, all of those sorts of things and might look at something or here's something like soft prophecy and say that approach is not direct enough or forceful enough. I love to hear your thoughts on that and what you would say to those who are passionate about working toward social change in that regard and how to hold something like soft prophecy.

Barbara Holmes: Everybody's not called to do everything. And so there are some who are called to object, to protest, to martyr themselves. There are some who are called to be on the inside, doing work on the inside for change. There are others who are to live what they want the system to be before the system changes and to exemplify that in their bodies and in their communities.

And so we always need things to be so simplistic. We just want it all easy. Everybody's called to do this. Everybody's supposed to do that. It isn't that way. Each of us has an inclination and a calling of the spirit that is so specific, and when you do that, you get a multiplicity of efforts that can bring systems down.

We've seen the Berlin Wall fall. We know Jericho falls with people just walking around. Water's part, and we say, "Well, that was then." But this also can be now.

The systems that are built on exploitation will fall. If we don't believe that, then we don't believe that God is God. So do what you are called to do. If you're supposed to be outside throwing rocks, throw them. If you're supposed to be inside being a good administrator, trying to make change from the inside, do that.

And we don't judge each other as to why one isn't doing the other. That's a waste of energy. We are all one community working as a microcosm of different efforts.

Drew Jackson: Thank you, Dr. B. So for those who might be doing some of that more frontline, direct, non-violent direct action sort of work that might be find itself more in that space of hard prophecy, that's more confrontational times. How can we engage in that and keep a tender heart?

Barbara Holmes: Oh, boy. That's hard. It requires the intentional setting aside of space for

contemplative ritual, contemplative silences, and the constant reminder that we do not do this of our own power.

If you begin to believe that any of your efforts on those front lines will change something, you're already in trouble. The fact that you are to throw the bricks, you are to lay in the streets, you are to block the police, does not mean that that's going to change anything. That means that's what you're supposed to do and the spirit changes everything.

So you don't have to look for outcomes. You don't have to be disappointed if nothing happens or if great harm comes. It is all in God's hands. That's hard to let go of.

I mean, once you're out there in the streets fighting for what is right, it's hard to say, "Well, ultimately my efforts are just efforts. They are an act of faith, but God will prevail."

You got to have constant reminders of that. And so you almost need a chaplain. If you're going to be in the streets, you need a chaplain for the folks who are in the streets. You need a hip-hop chaplain, you need a street chaplain, you need a chaplain.

Drew Jackson: It makes me think a lot about the role and the space that someone like Howard Thurman occupied, where he's not on the front lines of a movement per se, but he's in that space and holding that ground and there's so many who are on the front lines who are retreating to him or his work or his writings and regrouping in that belovedness.

Barbara Holmes: You're right, Drew. He was the chaplain. He was a chaplain for Martin Luther King. He was a chaplain for the movements that brought us where we are today. It's amazing. But one of the things that I'm very aware of is that once you get that, it doesn't necessarily stay.

Often you have to keep learning the same lessons over and over again. I found that after I got out of my PhD program and became a dean, a professor, a dean, and then the president, I got back into the system again because that's what I was doing was working for a system.

And at the end when I finally retired, I realized once again there was no there there. I had students who were getting into debt over their ears to get a degree where they were going to make maybe 30,000 a year, and really had no product to sell.

I kept saying, "What are we offering that is worth what we're charging and we're binding these people in debt?" I kept saying, "I'm becoming part of a system that I know is not right. Something's wrong here."

And so I was glad to be done with it, but you keep falling back into it when you live in a system that is run by capitalistic exploitation. The other thing I wondered about in that chapter was to be like the homeless, because Claire and Francis are asking you not just to put on a brown robe, but to actually live as they live, to live with them, among them, and that's a difficult request.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. Yeah. I'm just taking what you just said Dr. B in your own story. When I think about you as a mystic, as a seminary president, wondering how you don't get systematized in that space or does the system get mystified? Because it's a hard ground to hold, and I think about...

I would love to hear your thoughts on that in relation to the radical shift that Francis Sinclair did where they took that line seriously from Jesus of the poor will always be among you, and they took that as a call. Well, we will be among the poor. That's what Jesus is calling us to do.

Within that system, within that seminary institution based on these capitalist ideas, as a mystic, how much of your own mystical calling was calling you out of the system to be among the proverbial poor elsewhere? Does that make sense?

Barbara Holmes: Yes. It was constantly calling me, and so it manifested on an individual basis, a person to person basis. As a president, I had to raise money, millions of dollars, and I would find myself in situations with very wealthy people who were broken inside and they would come in contact with me, not a regular seminary president, and I recall them and name their brokenness and ask them if they wanted to be part of what God was doing next.

And if they wanted having accumulated so much money, if they wanted to take some of it and put it toward a poor student who needed this or needed that or to help provide some of the outreaches that the summary did to the poor.

I also did things that other seminary presidents didn't do. When they killed the young man in Minnesota, I was in the streets with the people. I was sending wood for the fire so they could stay up all night in the cold. I was financially supporting them.

So, yes, I was captured and I was being drawn out, but while I was there, I was called to be who I am in the midst of the system, to call God's people out who were drowning in their own wealth, to bless them and to say that God still saw them because I saw them.

There were so many blessed moments that I knew that I wasn't there for any of the reason but those moments. And so I felt glad to be done, felt gratified to have been allowed to be a blessing to others.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Dr. B. When you're in a system, how much of that squeeze can be felt even as you are participating in that system as yourself? And again, the way of simplicity but not simple, and the way of justice but not simple.

And I'm sure everyone listening can look back on their own life and think about their own story where they have these seasons of I'm grateful that happened but I never would've chose that, or I could feel the squeeze, I need to go through that. But these lessons and gifts that you offer on the other side of that, I think for me as a student of yours, just absorbing the multiplicity that occurs and the different spheres that I belong in, and there is no purity like this job will be absent of capitalism. This job will be absent of structural injustice. It is a part of every system that we engage with.

Barbara Holmes: Right. And sometimes you are there, like people have been there for me all my life on my journey. You are there for particular people at a particular time. And so that also is a blessing.

Drew Jackson: One of the themes, the threads that I hear throughout this conversation is the invitation toward letting go, wherever we're at this invitation of letting go. And one of my all time favorite quotes from Father Richard is in this chapter in chapter three, where he says, "To

pray and actually mean thy kingdom come. We must also be able to say my kingdoms go.”

Barbara Holmes: Oh, yes. Oh, I love that.

Drew Jackson: Let me just sit in that one for a little bit. But I wanted to ask you Dr. B, simply what does that mean to you? And practically speaking, how might you encourage listeners in the journey of letting go of their kingdoms?

Barbara Holmes: It’s going to require a dark night of soul. I’m sorry but there’s going to have to be a descent, and even as you emerge from the breaking places that makes you better, you don’t let go in the back of your mind of some things you want or wish you had.

You let your kingdom go reluctantly, always reluctantly, and you know there’s something better because it’s being offered you all the time. And yet the world, the secular is so enticing. Who doesn’t want a bank account debt? You don’t have to worry about anything. It just tickles your fancy.

You know you’re not going to have it, and even if you did, you wonder if you do the right thing with it. So you have to let it go. The last thing I’m letting go of, and I still... I mean, it was shocking to read that in that chapter, when he talks about the purse of your opinion.

I thought, “Oh, I’m good.” I like this and that. I sold my big house. But I still think you are wrong about the political stance you’re holding, and I still think... And so letting your kingdom go means opening the purse of your opinion and letting what’s inside fly away. That means that is troublesome because I want to interrogate these folks who are destroying the earth and the planet with their greed. I have an opinion about that.

I want to be engaged in a lot of things that I’m not called to be engaged in, but it’s just the purse of my opinion. So to open that purse means now I have to approach other human beings without prejudice because that was part of the purse of my opinion.

You have identified as a Republican or a Democrat, and I don’t particularly agree with what you people are doing, “you people.” And I have to let it go. And I have to greet you as a neighbor and loving neighbors isn’t always easy because the one who is the most annoying always moves in next door to you.

And so you have to figure out how to be in peace, live in peace, let go of your prejudices and opinions and allow the spirit of God to work through you in all things. I’m always amazed when people call me and ask me about something and spirit. I don’t know what I’m going to say, and spirit speaks for me.

It’s not magical. Everyone is connected to divine energy and divine spirit, and everyone has power, but not the kind of power that the world wants you to seek. This chapter of Father Richards is just that one chapter, such an amazing gift. So much wisdom.

Paul Swanson: Amen, Dr. B, I couldn’t say it better. And thank you for your wisdom today. That’s such a wonderful nod I think for us to land on is the invitation to let go of our kingdoms, open the purse of our opinions and not cling.

Thank you for speaking to us on the way of this soft prophecy in a hard world, for teaching it and buying it and inviting us to join in that it's nothing special, but it's getting out of the way so the spirit can move. Thank you so much for your time today.

Barbara Holmes: Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Drew, that was such a fun conversation for us to have with Dr. B.

Drew Jackson: It was.

Paul Swanson: So many highlights from there, from ruminations of depth and wisdom and all kind of etched into the practicality of everyday life. Is there anything that stuck out for you, in particular, from our conversation we just had with Dr. B?

Drew Jackson: I mean, there are so many nuggets, so many things that she shared. She reflected on her own life, her story, and I think it's this journey of letting go that is really staying with me as we wrap up that conversation. I think that is the invitation I'm feeling is to really consider what is it, what does it mean to let go of my own kingdom, my kingdoms? That's what's sticking with me, Paul.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. That was definitely a thread and through line throughout. I think about Dr. B using her own experience as a lifeline, right, from her acting career and letting go of that, and that led her into some work with the law and becoming a lawyer. And then letting go of that led her to the next stage of her journey.

And it was always the sense of releasing into this call that runs parallel to the themes of this chapter around simplicity and justice and living on the edge of the inside, but all with this through line of letting go.

Drew Jackson: And that somehow it seems counterintuitive, but it's this letting go and this path that is downward and not just climbing up or climbing higher, that somehow there's freedom there. We're so taught that freedom is to be found in filling the bank account or the next job or this next thing or this, then we'll find freedom.

And what Dr. B was reflecting on so much, even in her own story, was that freedom was not there, but actually freedom was releasing from those things, detaching from those things and that entire race altogether.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It's a conversation I think to revisit a few times to collect all the nuances and all those invitations of letting go. And Drew, as a way for us to leave those listening with contemplative prompts. You have a poem called Growing Down that really encapsulates this and speaks to this. Would you invite our listeners into a practice, a prompt with that poem?

Drew Jackson: Absolutely. So this poem, it's a short poem. It's called Growing Down. And as I share this poem, I want to invite you simply to sit with the words of this poem most lectio style. And don't hear the words and immediately think about, what do they mean or how to decipher them? But first, let the words wash over you, simply sit in them as I read it through the first time.

And then I'll read it through again. And as I read it through a second time, then you can begin to think about if there's a word or a phrase that is resonating in you for whatever reason, and just allow yourself to hold that. And then you can begin to discover what might that be inviting you into.

So this poem is called Growing Down, and it simply goes like this. Know that growth more often looks like letting go than adding more. Having all the extra stripped away until all that's left is love.

Sit with those words. What's coming up in you? What feelings? What emotions? What tensions? As I read it through a second time, allow yourself to hang on to a word or a phrase that's resonating with you.

Growing Down. Know that growth more often looks like letting go than adding more. Having all the extra stripped away until all that's left is love.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Drew.

Drew Jackson: Thanks, Paul.

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