



EVERYTHING BELONGS

Entering the World of Another
with Omid Safi

Mike Petrow: Hey friends. Welcome back to the Everything Belongs podcast. Just a reminder, this is a podcast where we go through the works of Father Richard Rohrer. This season we're looking at the book, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*. You absolutely do not have to read the book to get a lot out of these episodes as we have such rich conversations with Richard and some guests that help us live the teachings forward. But I will say whether you've read the book or not, this week is one of my all time favorite chapters and one of my favorite discussions that we put together for this season, *Entering the World of Another, Francis and the Sultan of Egypt*. Before we jump into that, my good friend Paul Swanson, it is good to see you today.

Paul Swanson: My friend, it's good to see you. How are you doing this morning as we dive into this wonderful conversation on this chapter that we both get hooked into about how moving and the ripple effect of what it teaches us in our times today?

Mike Petrow: Yeah, man, what a good series of conversations we have coming up and then thinking back to our episode with Father Adam Bucco and Kyra Juolingo and the integration of the negative. I'm thrilled to be here with you and I'm excited about what we're talking about and I'm also a little bit sick. So a little bit under the weather this morning, hoping to be on the mend soon, and I know I'm not alone in that. How are you feeling, my friend?

Paul Swanson: Well, you can't hear it in my voice as you can in yours, but I'm also in the recovery stages of being thrown to the curb by sickness and having it run through the old family. So I'm excited to be here with you and in a space where we get a chance to dig in a little bit to help set the scene for what listeners are going to enter, because yeah, I think Francis and the Sultan, this story just is so vivid and brings so much to the table about how we think about inter-religious dialogue, inter-religious action, welcoming one another into our traditions and a posture of humility. What's coming to mind for you? What sparked you in this episode?

Mike Petrow: Paul, I have to tell you, when we picked this book from before our first episode, I was looking forward to this chapter because I find this story so absolutely fascinating. I've seen icons that are so beautiful that show Francis and the Sultan of Egypt praying together or dancing together in prayer, and the story goes, Richard acknowledges this in the chapter. There's some historical debate about what actually happened. Once upon a time, if I remember the way Richard tells the story, people thought that Francis had gone to the Crusades, the Fifth Crusade was taking place. Francis went off to where the crusaders were to try to convert the "enemy forces," to convert the leader, the Sultan of the Islamic forces.

And as I think what Richard claims is, historians have shifted their perspective and now believe, or at least at the time of Richard's writing, believe that Francis actually went to preach to the crusaders to tell them that he thought they were wrong, and the crusades were a bit of a mess. The last crusade had actually sacked Constantinople, which was a Christian city, the Eastern Orthodox still a little bent out of shape about that one as they should be. And Francis was actually going to preach against war, and then when that didn't work out and they didn't listen, he just walks across the battlefield and ends up in this multi-day dialogue with the Sultan of Egypt. So I just couldn't wait to get into this. Did you know about this story before this chapter? I'm assuming you did.

Paul Swanson: I only knew about it from Richard's storytelling before I had read this book or he had written it because I think the myth of it is just so instructive of the image of Francis self critiquing his own group and calling them into question and his own conscious to step into those spaces where war fever is at large and the fog of war is happening, and there he is speaking to his own people's, calling it into question. And I think the implications for that in our own time and space, there's a boldness in Francis that I would love to see embodied and lived out more in our own Christian sphere. Where is that happening and knowing the risks of that while also befriending the supposed other?

Mike Petrow: It's an interesting thing. So you could think about this chapter as inter-religious dialogue. You have a Christian mystic and leader speaking to a Muslim mystic and leader, but there's another element of inter-religious dialogue there too, where you have a Christian teacher speaking against other Christians and challenging the way that they're interpreting their own faith. You have folks making war in the name of Christianity, and then you have Francis saying, no, you've lost the plot here. And I think that's inspiring as you just said. I think we live in a moment in time, and I think Richard's done this for us really, really well and modeled this for us really, really well, where we need faith leaders in all our various world religions who are willing to stand up and speak for love against those who would use the trappings and the opportunities that religion provides for them to try to promote nationalism or war or domination of other people. So yeah, this is a good one man, and I really appreciated how we got into that with Richard. It's just a good conversation at his house.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. I know that. I've heard such wonderful things about the conversation that you and Drew had with Brother Omid Safi. I would love to hear just a little snipping seed you can drop in the ground about what listeners can expect after the conversation with Richard. What struck you from that, circling around that conversation with Brother Omid?

Mike Petrow: Well, I will say that I had heard such good things about Brother Omid. I'd read some of his work and he's a dear friend, a dear friends of mine, and so he stepped onto the call with us before we hit record and we started chatting, and Dorothy, our producer, immediately was like, Hey, we need to start recording because everything that was being said was so good immediately, and you can hear in the tone and the timbre of his voice that he so embodies this gentle teaching that he shares with us, which is gentle but also very fierce in its willingness to preach love against violence.

I think he has this great book, *Radical Love Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*, and it's a bunch of different translations, but in the intro, there's this one sentence that I'm still meditating on. The path of radical love is the path that leads to God as well as the path that God walks. And it's just so simple and he invites us onto that path for the entirety of the conversation. I don't even want to give anything away to our listeners because it's so good, but I felt like I was walking that path with him the whole time, and my heart was burning in my chest just saying a deep yes to everything he said.

Paul Swanson: Wow. With that, let's turn our conversation over to the one we had with Richard on this chapter and let the fruits of that conversation speak for themselves.

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

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: And I'm Drew Jackson.

And this is Everything Belongs.

Richard, it's so great to be back with you here in your living room, hanging out with Opie and Paul and getting a chance to talk about Chapter 10, Entering the World of Another Francis and the Sultan of Egypt. It was just saying, I think of all the things that Francis did in his life, all the amazing things that he did, his visit to the Sultan and his track out into the battlefield of the Crusades to speak against war is probably the most impressive moment in his life for me, it makes such an impact. And so in this episode, we're going to get a chance to chat with you about these two things, about inter-religious dialogue, about reaching across the difference of faiths and having communication and also speaking into violence and conflict. To start with the first one, Richard, I have to ask, in your own life when you were growing up, when did you first encounter religious ideas that were different than yours?

Richard Rohr: Boy, that's a good question. Whenever it happened, I was unprepared to think that way. Just growing up in my own little Catholic Christian ghetto in Kansas where I had all my early religious experience and where you have your own, you tend to absolutize it. Well, everybody has to have it this way. When did that first... I think it might've been, at least this is what comes to mind now, it isn't real dramatic, but I did some hospital work in my years of theology in Dayton, Ohio, St. Elizabeth's Hospital. I remember meeting people who I soon found out were not Catholic, were not Christian, but who were in many ways more impressive as believers, more loving, more accepting, more kind, even to me, and it shook my paradigm of what is salvation about. These people show the evidence of being liberated from themselves, liberated for a larger God. It was so fortunate that that happened while I was studying theology and while the second Vatican Council put out its document on non-Christian religions.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, the second Vatican Council, that was a game changer and how-

Richard Rohr: Game changer, yeah.

Mike Petrow: How Christianity could think about other faiths.

Richard Rohr: And 50 years later, a lot of Catholics haven't read it.

Mike Petrow: Well, so for our listeners who might not be familiar with that, what's the shift with Vatican II? How we think about other religions and other faiths?

Richard Rohr: Well, without giving up, it's our love of Jesus and the Gospels. It still said that in each religion there are myths and stories and symbols that approach the divine, each in a different way and we need to respect them. In the 1960s, that was a huge step forward. Just to show honor, we need respect. I remember the paragraph on Hinduism in particular, many Gods and myths that show profound encounters with the divine. Why would you not listen to that? I'm sorry I don't have it right here right

now, but-

Mike Petrow: No, that's great.

Richard Rohr: ... you can go read the document [foreign language 00:11:57], Our Times.

Mike Petrow: Well, and of course when we say myths, we don't mean things that are untrue, but things that can be true without having to be literal. Richard, so in your career you've dialogued with leaders from other faiths and you also strike me as someone who's learned from other faiths and traditions. Would you be willing to share with us a few examples of where you think you've really learned from something outside of Christianity like the Bhagavad Gita or another spiritual teacher?

Richard Rohr: I have to say Buddhism stands out, but apart from that, I'd like to point out a way we don't think, Judaism stands out. We are not Jewish, and yet we're the children of Judaism. And that the structure of the Bible itself, by incorporating what we call the Old Testament, we are already honoring another world religion. It's encased in our sacred scripture. It's a permanent standing statement about respecting other religions. Unless we want to cut out two-thirds of the Bible, we better honor other religions.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: There it is. Judaism. Well, our grandparent in faith.

Mike Petrow: That's so brilliant. And so many folks don't know and nor should they have to, it's not their job, how much the Hebrew Bible itself references other traditions and other religions and other myths-

Richard Rohr: There you go. Go back a further step. And that we've only become aware of with modern scholarship.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: How many ancient myths are being quoted in the Old Testament

Mike Petrow: Yeah. And not plagiarizing, the ancient readers would've known that.

Richard Rohr: Better than we did. That's right.

Mike Petrow: Well, and Paul, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this especially it's interesting to think about that and even I think about Islam, which also considers itself the religion of Abraham and therefore would be a sibling to Christianity and Judaism, and yet we've seen how the failure of inter-religious dialogue has created so much conflict even leading up to the Crusades that were happening in Francis' time.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it's one of the thing about how porous the boundaries were and the ability to... Because wasn't it in the wandering of Egypt that so many new ideas got brought into Judaism even about the devil in particular, but just the different myths that became-

Mike Petrow: 100%.

Paul Swanson: ... enfolded, and now our boundaries have gotten so much stricter in ways of-

Richard Rohr: We've gone backwards in some ways.

Paul Swanson: We've gone backwards.

Richard Rohr: They call the high point of Spanish culture that... Forgive me for not remembering the centuries, but in southern Spain, in Sevilla, in Granada, when Islam, Judaism and Christianity lived in harmony, there's no other parallel to it. And yet Spanish Catholicism ends up being so tyrannical later.

Mike Petrow: Later. Appreciate what you said there about Egypt because in the Hebrew Bible you have characters that go down to Egypt, and Egypt was a spiritual and an intellectual crossroads, or even in the story of Jesus, people talk about the lost years of Jesus. Did Jesus go to India to study? How did Jesus have such a sophisticated worldview? And the story tells us Jesus went to Egypt where you'd have found Alexandria, which was the intellectual and spiritual crossroads of the world. So it's amazing to me that we then find Francis moving down-

Richard Rohr: Going back to Egypt again.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: The most ancient empire.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Wow. It's an amazing for us to look at this and I think part of, hopefully we're entering this new age of flourishing, of respect, curiosity about religions that are other than our origin religion and how we are conversation or relationship and in practice as it's welcome across traditions. And this is something where I feel like looking at the life of Francis, he's continually moving beyond a comfort zone, whether it's first with his father, he moves beyond that relationships, beyond himself with the leper, moving beyond his class down to the lower class and then eventually moving beyond even his own country or religion's crusade and crossing that boundary and moving beyond what was the supposed barrier for him. And he goes out into Egypt to go meet with the Sultan. And you open and close this chapter of the quote from Francis, I'm going to read here real quick.

If I tell them they'll consider me a fool, if I'm silent, I cannot escape my conscience. And these are Francis' words where he's discerning, how does he speak to his fellow Christians who are about to engage on this crusade? And he knows that they're off to fight the Muslims with this idea and he knows that this is not the way of Jesus. So Richard, I wonder if we could just break this down to give a sense of what the context was historically at this time. Could you say what was going on in this fifth crusade? Why were Christians on this "crusade" to go fight the Muslims.

Richard Rohr: Isn't it interesting, we still use the word crusade for an overly zealous, narrow-minded charging forth. And in this case, this is the fifth one, as you just said, instigated by the Pope of Rome, which was totally enmeshed in Italian Catholic culture. They couldn't see the difference between Jesus and their culture. They kept calling crusades. The ostensible reason

was the Muslims have the holy places and we have to have the holy places. So that sounds good to a pious Italian or German or Frenchman. It worked, especially when it promised that we promised them remission of all their sins if they'd go and fight for the holy places, and I'm sure very earnest young men poured out of their countries marching all the way across Turkey around the Horn to Jerusalem. But then the great disillusionment was when many of those soldiers just pillaged Constantinople.

Mike Petrow: A Christian city.

Richard Rohr: And this was a Christian city. So we clearly didn't know the nonviolent teaching of Jesus. And that has not been forgotten to this day how western Christians treated Eastern Christians.

Mike Petrow: Oh yeah, Eastern Orthodox folks have a saying.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yeah, you would know that. And their disillusionment with us is deserved, but then we marched on from there to what we call the holy land and tried to liberate it in a most unholy way. The nonviolent teaching of Jesus, even though it's totally upfront and clear in the Sermon on the Mount, had not developed in the Western church. We had to wait for the Quakers and the Mennonites and the Amish and we weren't there yet. That's what makes Francis a man born out of due time, and it's how did he in the 13th century already have such a clear nonviolent understanding of the gospel? Because he went there. When I was in high school seminary, we were glibly told, he went there to preach the gospel to the Sultan.

Now the more recent scholarship of people like Paul Moses and Kathleen Warren show, it's very clear he went there to preach to the Christians that they would be better Christians if they didn't come over here killing people. Amazing. But that remained hidden unexposed till my lifetime. That's why I think you're probably so moved by it too. It's just where did this come from? Why did no one tell us? There were a few people who understood the nonviolence of Jesus.

Paul Swanson: Which is that line if I tell them they'll consider me a fool, if I'm silent, I cannot escape my own conscience. That's the line of somebody who knows that they're going against the current of what their religion that they're supposedly a representative of, a leader of embodying. He's doing it in a nonviolent way, preaching that way to his own people. But that is almost a greater risk, because there's nothing heroic about preaching to your own people.

Richard Rohr: To your own.

Paul Swanson: No one's on your side.

Richard Rohr: Well put. Well put. And how did he gain the trust of the Sultan? But he did. There's still the horn in the Basilica in Assisi that the sultan gave him as a gift as he left. So how did he gain the sultan's trust when he had no reason to trust a Christian? It's all mind-blowing.

Mike Petrow: Was it Gandhi who said, I like your Christ, but I don't love your Christians.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And it's interesting to see the Sultan saw in him the authenticity of it.

Richard Rohr: This is a transformed man.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. So Francis, he's going off to preach against war to all these knights who've heroically ridden off in service of God and whatever the version of God and country would've been back then. And Francis himself was a knight when he was younger. He'd done this.

Paul Swanson: He's been there.

Mike Petrow: He'd donned the armor and rode off on horseback to fight.

Richard Rohr: But also became disillusioned with it.

Mike Petrow: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: And so what I wonder about Richard, you point out so well in this chapter how Francis holds the tension of having compassion for these knights because he'd been there and yet being willing to preach against the injustice of the crusade. What does that show us today? There's a contemplative stance there that helps us look at how we, with good intentions, and even what we would deem personally good ethics, can find ourselves participating in unjust systems. And our good intentions don't let us off the hook for our participation in unjust systems. What wisdom does that offer us for navigating that and then even for having compassion for those around us who are trapped in those unjust systems?

Richard Rohr: In my last book, and I'm quite sure it will be my last, I make a point of the prophets dealing with evil collectively. They don't waste much time. John the Baptist does, but he isn't a mature prophet like most of those in the Old Testament. They always address the collective. You're familiar with, you Chorazin, you Capernaum, you Bethsaida, you Jerusalem, they address the mood of the country or of the city. I think there's 34 towns or regions in the book of Moses and not a single naming of an individual. It's a completely different approach to evil than you and I have been raised in calling out bad politicians. Even the bad politicians are the fruit of an entire culture that approves of deceit or of undue wealth or of gun culture or it's all agreed at an earlier level by a culture or a city not to be bad, but in fact good.

That's where Francis really is in the line of the prophets. But because we didn't understand the prophets, we didn't understand Jesus who is in the lineage of the prophets, nor do we understand Francis, because Francis is in the lineage of the prophets. He turns established Christianity on its head by the things he makes important and the things he pays no attention to.

Mike Petrow: Well, it's such an interesting thing to challenge the notion, that guns could save us from guns, that war could save us from war, that conquest could save us from conquest.

Richard Rohr: Well put. Good, you should give this to [inaudible 00:26:10]. That's good. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: No, thank you. I appreciate you connecting that to your upcoming book on the Tears of

Things because I think that journey from anger to sadness to love is what probably gives us the courage to hold that tension and criticizing the collective and still loving the people inside it.

Richard Rohr: And speaking of the tears of things, the earliest Celano biographies of Francis, I don't know how many times he's discovered crying, just weeping.

Mike Petrow: Oh, I didn't know that.

Richard Rohr: There's a cave with a painting of him just wiping his eyes. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It's so striking that image of Francis in tears. And not only the prophetic words that he speaks but also embodies in this sense of this... He's a prophet in presence as well.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Paul Swanson: When he goes to visit the Sultan, as we talked about earlier, that had to be just shined through even as the institution which he is flowing out of when Christianity is seeking to crusade against the Sultan. Is this a good definition of a saint as a person who radically embodies the gospel, even if when it's up against the forces of the institution that it's coming from-

Richard Rohr: Christianity.

Paul Swanson: Christianity.

Richard Rohr: I think so. It creates in the individual a capacity for self-criticism. They have critiqued their own ego in such a radical way that they have a very healthy mistrust of systems whenever they're in power, whenever they control the show. That isn't the way most of us, Catholics at least, we're thought to think of a saint, but I think it's pretty true.

Paul Swanson: It would be amazing to be able to see and move beyond the individual as well, where it's an entire community-

Richard Rohr: That's the key.

Paul Swanson: ... seeking sanctification instead of defaulting to let's rely on guns to stop guns instead of let's rely on love embodied and presence to be a presencing force in the world. And to me, individuals can get lifted up, but without the communal nature of a collective moving forward in that way, it becomes a lot easier to just highlight the individual saint instead of the movement of a wider collective.

Richard Rohr: Not only the collective as you just said, but a space-time understanding of the kingdom of God as here and now, not later reward. Once removed, thy kingdom come, thy will be done here as it is in heaven. What I probably have said already in this series, the obvious healings of Jesus being concerned with the present tense. He's not saying, oh, you're going to go to heaven now because you believe in me. Many lines in John's gospel could give you that impression if you believe in me, but Jesus healed people not for a later heavenly reward, but for this life right now in Israel and they died five years later like everybody else does, but he

gave them an extension of life to show them what life really meant.

Mike Petrow: It's so funny how we hear things like that where Jesus says, if you believe in me, and it's so common to assume that that means-

Richard Rohr: If you join our club.

Mike Petrow: ... joining some club, signing up for some long list of theological beliefs and not like if you believe in me, the simplicity of if you believe in me, follow these teachings. Really do love your neighbor. Really do lay your life down for the person in front of you.

Richard Rohr: He couldn't have gained the Sultan's respect if a Sultan didn't feel very respected by Francis.

Mike Petrow: And that's what I love about this is I don't know if Francis was attempting to convert the Sultan or not. We don't have access to what their actual conversations were, but they didn't convert each other and yet they had a beautiful dialogue. They learned from each other, they prayed for each other, which is amazing. And this idea that, we talk about the perennial tradition, you've talked about this Richard, this idea that there's one set of ideas and one journey in between all the world's religions. Are we talking about the perennial conversation, which is as long as humanity has been around, we have been asking the questions and talking about the things that matter most, and those conversations give rise to the major world religions, but they continue between them. And when I see faith leaders like this who don't try to preach to other religions but are willing to listen to them and sit at their feet and learn and have dialogue and have conversation, it feels like that's where the real spiritual genius takes place.

Richard Rohr: That's what makes you a follower of Jesus, that you have a heart as big as Jesus, not that you join the Jesus club. How do we get that straightened out? I don't know.

Mike Petrow: If we step into that heart of Jesus, what advice and guidance would you give us for being people who can listen and who can authentically share our experience and even our beliefs, whether it's listening and learning from people in other faiths and other traditions or with belief systems that are different than ours, or even listening to those who are participating in systems that we think are unjust and having compassion for them and their experience while also speaking our truth towards the systems. How do we step into that place with the heart of Jesus of listening and sharing?

Richard Rohr: There has to have been somewhere in your life journey, a major defeat to your egocentricity, which humbles you forever. If I could have been this wrong, I'm not going to be wrong again and arrogantly assert things I know nothing about. If that humiliation hasn't happened or doesn't happen, we just confuse group belonging with conversion of consciousness. You always come back to that unless the grain of wheat die, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12:24, there is no way around the defeat, the humiliation of the ego or what we call the false self.

Mike Petrow: That's profound. We'd mentioned this in a previous episode where one of the fascinating similarities between Francis and the Buddha is that they had both had these early life experiences of seeing the limitations of their power and privilege and also the ego defeat and

encountering the suffering of others.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it seems like also like a heart of hospitality. If you've gone through that, you're more hospitable to those who-

Richard Rohr: Good choice of-

Paul Swanson: You can hold in that same way. Look at Jesus and the table fellowship. Look at Francis and seeking out the leper. Those are modalities of hospitality that I think we can learn from and draw from in our own engagement.

Richard Rohr: You guys get it. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard. It's been a treat.

Mike Petrow: This has been great. Thank you. This is one of my favorite conversations we've had so far this season.

Richard Rohr: You say that every week.

Mike Petrow: I know. They just keep getting better, but this really is, this is a good one.

Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Paul Swanson: Omid Safi is a teacher in the Sufi tradition of radical love and founder of illuminated courses and tours. He's currently a professor at Duke University specializing in Islamic spirituality and contemporary thought. A leading Muslim public intellectual. Omid is committed to the intersection of spirituality and social justice. His most recent book, which Mike Can't stop raving about, is *Radical Love: Teachings From the Islamic Mystical Tradition*. If you want to hear more, you can check out his podcast, *Sufi Heart*, and we put links to all of his tremendous offerings in our show notes.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh. Welcome everyone again to the Everything Belongs podcast. Drew Jackson, great to be here with you again, my friend.

Drew Jackson: As always, Mike. So good to be here.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh, I am so overwhelmingly thrilled about our guest today, Brother Omid, would you mind repeating yourself for our listeners to tell us again? We asked you do you prefer to be called Omid, Professor Safi? And you shared this beautiful insight with us about John and what it means. I'll just let you take it from there. That was so wonderful.

Omid Safi: Yeah, thank you very, very much. And it's really lovely to be with you and with your community. So in much of the East, there is an affectionate suffix that is added to people's names, people who are dear to you or you hope they might come to be dear to you. And it's the suffix, John, just like the American name John. And John means soul, soul or even life force and everything has a soul. And so you would be Mike John and Drew John. And almost anybody who's dear to me calls me Omid John. And it's basically the idea both that in our encounter, maybe much like the encounter that we may touch upon today between St.

Francis and the Sultan, we are striving to see, yes, our physical form which is itself blessed, but also the soul that this is a soul to soul encounter and that this person not only has a life and a precious one, wild and beautiful life, but also that in some ways they've become so dear to us that they're like the life force that sustains us.

Mike Petrow: That is absolutely gorgeous. And may it be so in our conversation today.

Drew Jackson: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Omid John, if I may, if I'm using it correctly.

Omid Safi: Please, perfectly.

Mike Petrow: I have to tell you, I've just returned from a week in the desert. I've taken my annual retreat out in the cold, in the sand and the stars. And your collection of translations from the mystical tradition of Islam was my companion while I was out in the desert. So thank you so much. What a gift.

Omid Safi: Thank you for taking me along to that wonderful theater of the divine qualities that our master Jesus and our master Muhammad and so many of the great sages have gone to in order to go within.

Mike Petrow: Oh, it's so rich. Reading texts from the desert in the desert is something else. And the title of your translation says it all, radical love. I love this statement. In the introduction you say, the path of radical love is the path that leads to God as well as the path that God walks. That is awesome. And later you write, as Rumi says, it is through this radical love that the bitter becomes sweet, the thorn turns into a rose, the pain contains healing and the dead come to life. And I just, wow, I read that and I thought, gosh, I could close the book and meditate on that for the rest of the week. Just to kick us off, is there anything you would be willing to share with us today about how love is the beating heart of Islam and of God.

Omid Safi: Not even just the beating heart of God, the very essence of God, the whole of God and a God who doesn't show up in this world as love and as loving may not be God, it might be the other guy. And I shared something with some of my friends yesterday that some of these words like God are quite ubiquitous and they roll off the tongues of people quite easily at times from people in very prominent corridors of power. And when you hear that G word, you want to pay very close attention to where's the love. And where does that love show up and how far and high and deep does that love extend?

Does it roll down like waves towards those who at the moment find themselves weak and vulnerable? So the love that we're speaking of here is really God in action. It's really God moving through this world and in saying that this love is very much at the very heart of the Islamic tradition, is not to make any kind of a claim on exclusivity. Religion is not the game of monopoly. You don't get to build hotels on the land of love and charge people rent because they've landed on love. No, I think it's the deeper you go and the more we drink from the depth of any of the world's great spiritual traditions, it just makes you recognize it when you come in touch with it in a parallel tradition.

Mike Petrow: I love that so much. There's a story in the Gospels which is very near and dear to my heart,

and in it, two of Jesus' disciples are walking down the road and a man comes and joins them and they walk for a while and they talk, and they talk about scriptures and they talk about the divine mysteries, and then later they share a meal and suddenly there's a miraculous revelation. And these two disciples realize that it's actually Jesus who's been among them the whole time. And then he disappears. And they reflect on the moment and they say, didn't our hearts burn within us when we heard him talking? And I have to tell you, decades ago, the first time I read an English translation of the verses of the Poet Rumi, that was my exact thought immediately was this is coming from a tradition outside of my own, but I can feel my heart burning within me-

Omid Safi: Absolutely.

Mike Petrow: ... in the recognition of some type of familiarity.

Omid Safi: Yeah. Yeah, and what if God and those who embody God so beautifully, what if they're veiled from us through their over familiarity? What if God is not hidden at all but is hiding in plain sight? And what would it be to walk around and to make sure that in every tree, in every blade of grass, in every gentle breeze that brushes against your cheek, and perhaps most of all in every human, you come to see that breath of the divine, that soul of the divine. What if we come to see the human heart as the highest shrine of God? How would it change the way we live together? How would it change the way we treat one another? How would it change the way that we walk on the earth? And I think the more our ethics and our contemplative life feed into each other forth and back, back and forth, the more luminous all of it becomes.

Mike Petrow: I am such a lover of all the different traditions that build on the poetry of the Song of Songs as a great mystical revelation, and this idea that divine love comes to us in human relationships, and human relationships point us to divine love. And divine love makes human relationships matter. And what I'm hearing you say, what is it about this love poetry that comes to us, especially in a poet like Rumi, that makes the intimate love right in front of us divine and then also so much bigger? Does that question make sense?

Omid Safi: Oh, it's such a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful question, and I love the Song of Songs. If you talked about having so beautifully taken this set of teachings that I was honored to be associated with that book, *Radical Love into the Desert With You*, there are two saintly beings who grace the cover of that book, there were two friends, one of them a teacher, one of them a seeker, but they're friends. And one of them, the older one, he writes the first book that we have in Islam on this tradition of radical love. And he is not some marginal figure. 200 years before we have an Oxford or a Cambridge, the greatest university in the world was in the city of Baghdad and what is today Iraq. And this scholar was their most famous, most distinguished scholar and a lover of God and a lover of humanity and a poet and a sage and a mystic, and, and, and.

And in this book that he writes on radical love, he begins it by saying, some of my friends have asked me to write them a book on radical love, and I agreed on one condition that you will never again divide love into the love of God and the love of humanity for you realize that love is one and you cannot love God without loving humanity, nor can you love humanity without loving God. Love is of one essence. And he says, as long as we're all in

agreement on that, then I'll tell you about love. And I think that's such a beautiful, beautiful starting place.

Drew Jackson: What you just said, Brother Omid, reminds me of a quote from the Poet Jericho Brown in his work, *The Tradition* where in one of his poems, he starts by saying, I begin with love, hoping to end there.

Omid Safi: That's right.

Drew Jackson: And I sit with that line often, that love is the beginning point, it is the ending point, the alpha, the omega, it's all of it.

Omid Safi: Isn't that so lovely? Isn't that so lovely? Because the ends are usually prefigured in the beginnings. And there's this wonderful, wonderful statement that Muslims say when the news is brought to us that somebody has finished their earthly journey or to put it in American English, that they've died. And what is said is [foreign language 00:48:53], we are always in every breath coming from God, and we're always in every breath returning to God. And if God is as the Bible and as Rumi and all these sages agree, if God is love and if love is God, we come from love and we're always returning to love. And here we are in this tiny short period of time between coming from love and returning to love, and how do we want to spend these few breaths?

Drew Jackson: Beautiful. And I was so excited to be in conversation with you, Brother Omid, because I know that you are a lover of poetry, and as Mike knows and our listeners know, I, outside of the work that I do here at CAC, I'm a poet. And one of my primary interests is language and how language works, or to say it another way, what work language is doing in the world and in the space between us. I assume that given your immersion in the world of poetry and translation, you might say something similar. One of my dear friends, the Poet Padre Gotuma, he's doing a lot of work around poetry and conflict, conflict resolution, seeking to understand whether poetry can help conflicted groups focus the language of their disagreement into more fruitful exchange. And so I wanted to ask you, Brother Omid, do you think the language of poetry can help us navigate the often conflicted space between religious identities? And if so, what do you think that might look like?

Omid Safi: Oh, what a timely question. My dear wonderful brother Drew John, there's a part of me on the good days of the week that not as a way of evading a question, but as a way of reminding us that other worlds are possible. I do want to insist that I fundamentally do not believe that there is religious conflict and tension in this world. There's conflict in this world, there is genocide in this world. We've been watching it for a year and a half. I don't care what name you put on it. There is racism, there is starvation, intentional starvation of people. There's occupation, there's lots of hideous things happening. I think that's ego and that's greed, and that's selfishness, and that's putting the small self individually and communally and nationally and racially on the throne of wrong and to put, as Brother Martin used to say, to put the right forever on the scaffold.

Greed and ego and hatred loves to do, I think the cool kids today call it cosplay. And its favorite costume are the things that are of light including religion. I want us to really sit with that question of is there actually religious conflict in this world when what is it that we

find our religious traditions teaching us at the heart of the Jewish faith? That beautiful noble tradition. Be kind to the stranger for you yourselves were once strangers in Egypt. Be kind to the poor, the orphan, the needy, the widow, our beloved Christ, that which you do to the least of these you do unto me and our beloved Prophet Muhammad, that the cry of the orphan rises all the way up to the throne of God and shakes it to its mighty foundation.

These folks are drinking from the same fountain. They're bathed in the same light. So I do want us to be able to discern the meaning of that beautiful prayer of the Prophet Muhammad when he says, my Lord, allow us to see things as they are in you. Allow us to see things as they are in truth. And just because ego and greed and hatred are doing cosplay as religion, I don't want us to give it that much credit. I want us to insist that no, there is real religion, there's real faith, and it's humble and it carries the scent of love and concern, not just for our own kind, but for all of us, because it's a little bit like we're all in this tiny little boat in this stormy sea, and some of us are foolish enough to think that if we poke holes on the other side of the boat, it's lifting our side higher. No, we're all going to drown.

I do think language matters. I do think stories and music and novels and poems to have the power to do things that mere discursive knowledge doesn't. If you listen to amazing music, even if you don't speak the language, it does something to you. It moves you at the heart level. Great poems can do that. Great literature does that.

Drew Jackson: Wow.

Mike Petrow: I think about that and I think about this beautiful story that Richard talks about in this chapter. Francis goes to talk to the Sultan in thinking about what we learn from those in other traditions and other paths and how they give us something back about our own. I'm curious, I'll say one more thing, sorry, I'm just all over the place on this one, but one of my great teachers says that curiosity is one of the best expressions of mystical love. How do you think curiosity and love can drive us to this place of just mixing and mingling in the alchemy of conversing across traditions and deepening where we stand and being led to new places?

Omid Safi: Oh, what a beautiful, beautiful question. And if I was going to actually practice the fruits of my own tradition, I would sit with that question and I would sit with in silence. Drujan was just talking about poetry and language, and I don't know of a more beautiful mystical poet in the world than Rumi. And Rumi ends about a third of his poems with his handle, essentially, his poetic name, which is I've said everything that can be said with words, now it's time for me to hush. And you got to go and write your own poems in the silence, which is not the absence of words, it's an invitation. So just because I might say something about curiosity, that's only a reflection of our finite limited time that we have here, but I know that there's eternities waiting after we've stopped our conversation. Curiosity is both about awe, which is as Rabbi Heschel says, it's the one indispensable necessary approach to God. All that the soul ever needs are God, a breath and a moment, and all three are possible. And that sense, he calls it radical amazement is necessary.

Curiosity is about that. It's about that sense of awe and radical amazement. We have an amazing God who has created an amazing creation and these amazing wisdom traditions. And curiosity is also about that most Earth-like of qualities which is humility. It's about not just breathing out but also breathing in, also receptivity. But when I think about this

encounter between St. Francis and Sultan Malik al-Kamil, by the way, that name means at least among other possibilities, the perfected king.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Omid Safi: What a beautiful thing to think about, having rulers who have worked on their own ego to have achieved something of what it means to be a real human being. And how I love the fact that that Sultan, who spends, we're told about two weeks or so with St. Francis, he is the nephew of Saladin, Salo Hadin in the East and it's Saladin, of course, who liberates Jerusalem. And doesn't just liberate his own people, he liberates everybody. That's a good model of a perfected human being. How encouraging to think of this not only as a dialogue of a Muslim and a Christian, but also of a mystic and a ruler. What if those whose job and whose vocation and whose calling is the life of the spirit had something to teach those whose job it is to govern? But these kinds of archetypal stories, and Mike John and I were chatting a little bit before we came on air and Mike was asking, do you think this really happened?

Sometimes we have such a narrow sense of what is real and we think that if historically we can prove or disprove that Jesus really go under the ground for three days and did Muhammad really rise to heaven and see the face of God? I choose to believe that, some of us might choose to believe many of these stories, and yet there is a truth about them that far precedes and supersedes their historicity, if you would. These are archetypal stories. These are, to use that beautiful word which is so misunderstood, especially in the West. These are sacred myths. And folks in the West, ever since the time of Plato have made this painful division between myth and history. When that great Rumi, when he dies and they're carrying his body to the cemetery, the Sultan who's presiding over this funeral, he notices that the Jewish community and the Christian community are also marching behind the coffin. And he's very puzzled because Rumi was, of course, a Muslim sage, though his heart was as open as the ocean and he had very close friends, especially from the Christian contemplative community. They used to meditate together.

And so he calls them over and he says, well, I know why we are crying because we feel like another gate to heaven is closed for us. He is with the beloved. We're not worried about Rumi, we're worried about us, but why are you crying? And the Jewish community says, well, we never thought we would see another one who would so beautifully embody what we've seen in Moses. And the Christians say, we never would imagine we would see a second Christ, but when we look at him, we feel like all the love and all the compassion that we had ever come to see in Christ we're also seeing in him. And note, neither one of them says, and therefore we became Muslim. They stay in the particularity of their own community, but they recognize that light is light and water is water and love is love and God erupts. And a volcano doesn't stay in one track, and neither does God's grace.

Mike Petrow: One version of this story and the way that it takes place in the theater of the human imagination is that Francis went initially not to convert the Sultan, but to convert the crusaders. He went to critique those who were making war in the name of his religion and to bring them back to love. And when he was unsuccessful with the crusaders, he found a brother in the Sultan who welcomed him across enemy lines and I, for one, as someone rooted in the Christian tradition and fed by so many others, I need this story of a Christian who goes and speaks to other Christians and counsels them against war and violence, and

brings them back to love. I wonder, Brother Omid, if you could share any wisdom with us from the Quran or any of these amazing teachings that you've been immersed in, and how the practitioners of the religion of love can speak against what you were describing earlier, how ego wears the cosplay of religion to enact violence.

Omid Safi: Drew John, when I think about your graciousness, Mike John, when I think about your question, my own life has been enriched by sages, both famous ones and also everyday ordinary humble folks. I was very blessed in my life to have been loved on by the late Uncle Vincent Harding, close friend of Dr. King, he wrote the Riverside Church speech of Dr. King, which is Martin's most radical speech and probably what got him killed. I was very blessed to be able to sit at the feet of Uncle Vincent. And for me, I have the same love for Uncle Vincent as I do for Rumi. My soul doesn't distinguish between the wisdom that is there, I don't say was there, is there in Uncle Vincent. So I'm not a St. Francis, but I know a little tiny bit about that dynamic of going and sitting at the feet of someone and just by the grace of God being blessed with a friendship and a companionship of that.

Mike John, I think the one thing that I would say, now 35 years or so into this calling and this work, I'm not sure that speaking against racism and violence and hatred actually work. We got to call people to something, for something and ordinary folks. So we don't have the luxury of thinking that we can either be pure contemplatives, disengaged from the world, sitting in our beautiful caves and deserts and meditating for eternity, or that we have to go out there disassociating from the life of the spirit and bring about radical social transformation. No, if God is an ocean, then the change in transformation rooted in God also has to be like an ocean. There have to be waves that come to the shore and then go back to the depth of the ocean. The heart is this way, the heart contracts and then it expands. The breath is this way. We take a breath in, it rejuvenates us, and then it is released and it rolls over the hills and the trees and mingles with all of the birds and the animals.

I think that's really our calling, is to figure out how do we balance together the twin mandates of love and justice, of contemplation and action, to bring about a world in which all of us can thrive.

Drew Jackson: As we bring our conversation to a close, I want to come back to the intro of your book, Radical Love, and there's one passage that's just been sticking with me where you talk about the idea of mingling love in your translation of Rumi's poem. In this poem you say that Rumi talks about, and I'm quoting you here, "This overflowing, spilling over love as one that mingles between God and humanity, humanity and humanity, this world and that world, here and there, now and forever." And if you don't mind, I just want to read the short poem for our listeners.

Omid Safi: Please do.

Drew Jackson: So they can hear these words.

Omid Safi: Yeah.

Drew Jackson: Look, love mingles with lovers. See, spirit mingling with body. How long will you see life as this and that, good and bad? Look at how this and that are mingled. This poem and the idea of mingling love reminds me a lot of how Father Richard talks about non-dual

consciousness, and this way of seeing the world and being in the world not through the lens of binary such as in or out, right or wrong, friend or enemy, but through a fundamental and radical oneness. And the idea of mingling love, especially as I think about it in the context of this story of St. Francis and the Sultan brings to mind that quote from Dr. Martin Luther King who we've been talking about throughout this conversation where he says, love is the only force in the universe powerful enough to transform an enemy into a friend.

Really, I just wanted to invite you as we bring this conversation to a close, to talk a little bit about this idea of mingling love, your understanding of it and Rumi's work and the teaching of Islam, and really how you might invite our listeners to open themselves to this mingling love in the world.

Omid Safi: Thank you for that invitation. And as long as we can have this just be yet another step in that conversation and not some final word, Hollywood loves climax scenes and in romcoms, there's that always that scene where the two people are running towards each other always in the rain or snow. I don't know why that is, and the spiritual path is a little different. It's sometimes there are these zen like eruptions of the sacred for sure, but some of it is like slow cooked meals and slow food is always better than fast food. And you put something on the stove and four hours, six hours, 10 hours later, there's no point at which you can look at and to say, oh, now it's just something fundamentally different. But all of a sudden the spices and the lentils and whatever, if you have any other protein source in there, they've come together in a way that it's hard to distinguish them anymore.

The flavors have bled all over each other. I'd love to think of that model of cooking, slow simmering cooking as a model of the spiritual life of transformation and the beauty of this language of mingling. How long are you going to speak of this world and that world of human and divine, male and female is that God is one. That's the one thing we all got to agree on. God is one. We can't have 17 ultimate divinities up there. God is one. And to the extent that the goal is not for us to go to heaven, but it's to actually summon the kingdom of God here on earth. We got to have this world be somehow a reflection of that oneness, of that unity, of that mingling. I think before I give in to not silence but hushing and letting us stay in this sweet conversation.

I want to also honor the fact that this is also an age of despair for a lot of people, and it's a time of exhaustion of the heart and Rumi has this short little quatrain and I take heart from it. I take comfort in it, and he says, I know you are tired. And every time I read it, I'm like, yes. It's like I'm tired of seeing the world be as it is and not as it ought to be. I'm tired of us humans killing other people's babies. I'm tired of the rich oppressing the poor, of men oppressing women. He says, I know you're tired. Come, this is the way. And I think there's something about that clarity that this path of love is the way in whatever ocean we happen to be swimming in, whatever faith tradition illuminates our life, come. This is the way.

Mike Petrow: Oh, so rich. Thank you. Thank you, Brother Omid John.

Omid Safi: Thank you Mike Johns.

Mike Petrow: A gifted meeting. And yeah, I'll be thinking about this for a long time. Thank you for joining us on the Everything Belongs podcast.

Omid Safi: You're welcome.

Paul Swanson: Wow, Mike. I got to say that was a powerful conversation. It was a gift to bear witness to it, and then at the end there's this pause, this moment of reverential silence. What was that like to journey through that conversation with Brother Omid and Drew?

Mike Petrow: I haven't heard the final edit yet, so I don't know how much of that, there was a long pause. I'm sure we'll shorten that up for the sake of our listeners, but Brother Omid won the palpable kindness with which he immediately showed up and invited us into conversation. And we're the hosts of the podcast. This is what we do. He just exuded, for my taste, the love that he talked about. And yeah, at the end it was really, really funny. So that last bit, his closing words, we were literally Drew, myself and Dorothy, our producer, we were all just speechless, didn't know what to say, and we just hung out there in the silence. And then it was funny, he had to wrap it up and gave us a deep bow and was like, okay, I'm going to go. And then exited the call and we were all just still hanging out in the afterglow. It was really, really beautiful.

Paul Swanson: I love hearing that because there's a way in which I believe silence can be a very generous partner in conversation where it holds what's been shared in a way that almost wraps it up as a gift so that you can take it with you as you depart, and carry it as the rest of your day. And that certainly, I think the experience as a listener of this conversation. What else comes to mind to you as you think about the things that you're going to carry with from this conversation into your day-to-day life and practice?

Mike Petrow: I appreciated Brother Omid bringing us back to this, I'm not giving you an answer. That's my paraphrase of his words. This is a conversation and we're all participants in it, and the conversation continues reflecting on this marvelous encounter between Francis and the Sultan, and being reminded that every encounter we have every day I think can be like that if we choose to see it through the eyes of love. At the top of the episode, I read this little quote that I love from his book, and it's so tiny, but it's so poignant. The path of radical love is the path that leads to God as well as the path that God walks. And this notion that we get to walk that path to God and with God and with each other, and that we're all just walking side by side, having these conversations in good times and bad times, encouraging each other forward to love, and when we lose the way encouraging each other back to love. That's my kind of takeaway right now is how do I keep going back to that path of love?

Paul Swanson: I think that is a incredible invitation for all those listening to consider. Is there anything else you would want to say prompting folks in that direction as how they might start that conversation, how they might start that path, or how might they recognize it if they're already on it?

Mike Petrow: I have to go back to the last thing Brother Omid said when he quoted Rumi, and I feel like so many of our listeners relate to this, this little poem that says, I know you're tired and you can hear it in my voice, Paul, I'm tired. And I know you're tired. And it's a moment in time and in the world where so many of us are tired. But the poem says, I know you're tired, but come. This is the way. And the way is the path of love. May we all, no matter how exhausted we are, find the strength and the courage to keep on walking on the path of love and keep inviting others back to it.

Corey Wayne: Thanks for listening to this podcast by the Center for Action and Contemplation, an educational non-profit 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

Mike Petrow: Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: Drew Jackson.

Jenna Keiper: Jenna Keiper.

Izzy Spitz: Izzy Spitz.

Megan Hare: Megan Hare.

Sara Palmer: Sara Palmer.

Dorothy Abraham...: Dorothy Abrahams.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

Vanessa Yee: Vanessa Yee

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.