

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

Brian McLaren

Jacqui Lewis

with Richard Rohr

2: Seeing Is A Social Act

Brian McLaren: I made a lot of mistakes in my life, but there's one that I can barely talk about. Years ago, in the early days of the internet, I was a pastor, and our church started a listserv. It was like a chat room that you participated in by email. It provided a way for folks from our church to interact before the days of Facebook and Instagram. One day in our listserv someone posted something that was deeply judgmental and offensive to gay people. That was pretty common in those days, especially among conservative church folks who assumed that all good Christians agreed with them that LGBTQ folks were sinners, objectively disordered, and so on. I wasn't really in that camp myself, but I wasn't very outspoken about it.

A man in our church emailed me separately from the listserv. He was gay, but was not out yet or he didn't want to post as himself, but he had privately come out to me, and he wondered if I would post something for him on his behalf, asking everyone on the listserv to understand how homophobic that comment felt to him, how it made him feel pain, and how it made him feel maybe he wasn't wanted or didn't belong in our church. And, of course, I was happy to do so.

So, he sent me something, I cut and pasted it, and put it into the listserv. And soon people responded to him. So, some of them responded with a lot of sensitivity. Some of them responded with all the predictable fire and brimstone, but the conversation now was happening. Whenever he wanted to post a response, he would send it to me, and I would cut and paste it and put it in the listserv. And this went on, as I now recall, for a few months.

Well, you can probably see what's coming. Yes, by mistake, I included his email address in one of my rushed cut-and-paste jobs, which meant that I outed him. Someone called me, "Brian, are you aware of what you just did?" I had no idea, but it was too late. His email address and therefore his name was out there. That literally was one of the worst nights of my life, and I've had quite a few really bad ones. I had hurt somebody who trusted me. It was unintentional, but it was because I was rushed. It was because I hurried. I wasn't careful enough. And just as an uncareful driver can cause an accident that harms other people, my action had really harmed this dear brother and his family. [music]

I went over to his house. He was devastated. He knew I had just been trying to help. He knew I cared, but still I'd really hurt him and messed up and complicated his life. I had caused one of the biggest disruptions in his life to that point, and I didn't know what I could do. I just sat in his living room on the verge of tears. I just felt this cinderblock in the pit of my stomach, and he looked at me across the room. He didn't cuss me out. He didn't yell at me, didn't tell me to go to hell, didn't threaten revenge. He forgave him. In fact, we're still friends to this day.

The issue of LGBTQ equality and identity is, among other things, a classic case of people struggling to see the reality of their neighbors. It is a kind of bias and that if we grow up without gay people, without gay people in our lives, we never hear their stories. We only hear the stories of people who are not gay offering their perspective on gay people, and we're prone to believe what the communities that we trust tell us until we actually encounter someone.

Many years later, I learned that two of my own four children were gay, but I had no idea that night when I sat in that fellow's living room. All I knew was that the victim of one of the

worst mistakes I ever made showed grace to me. He acted like a true Christian. He forgave me of an offense worse than I'd ever committed against anyone else. And I couldn't help it in the days and months and years that followed, that when I heard people say insulting, insensitive, judgmental things about gay people, now it was part of my dataset that the most gracious act that had been done to me in my adult life, the most gracious act was from a gay person through that man, and through my children, and through the hundreds of LGBTQ friends I've met through them, I see my LGBTQ friends as beautiful people, as courageous, resilient, misunderstood, beloved people, and I wonder why can't others learn to see them that way. [music ends]

Welcome back, everyone, to Learning How to See. Last week we introduced the idea of bias, and we introduced the first of a Baker's dozen of powerful biases that affect us. And in many ways they form a framework for all of the others that we'll look at. We looked at confirmation bias where we set up a frame or a paradigm, and then we welcome anything that fits within it, and reinforces it, confirms it, and we reject anything that doesn't fit. And then we looked at complexity bias that we like to keep things simple, that our brains are efficient, and they like simplicity. And so, they just push away anything that feels unnecessarily complex. The unfortunate result of complexity bias is that our brains prefer simple lies or delusions to complex truths or realities. And those in a way happen within our own heads.

But now, today, we look at the social dimensions of seeing, to think about seeing as a social act. When we take the fact that, Jacqui and Richard, complexity bias and complacency bias are in your brains and they're in my brain, and when we get together, they sort of, they sort of team up. So, I'll just mention these next two biases and then I'd love to get your initial thoughts or reactions. First is community bias. It is very hard to see something your group doesn't also see or that your group doesn't want you to see. This is also called social confirmation bias, that we prefer our tribe over the truth. And then, second, is complementarity bias. If people are nice to me, I'll be open to what they have to say. If they aren't nice to me, then I'll be closed to what they have to say. In other words, if truth comes to me with a friendly face, I'm more likely to accept it, and if it comes to me with anger or hostility, I'm resistant toward it. So, just based on that, what comes to mind? I'd love to hear what you're thinking. Jacqui, do you want to jump in first?

Jacqui Lewis: Sure. Hey, Brian. Hi, Richard. I'm thinking about, I'm thinking about the complementarity bias. What's coming to me first, Brian, is thinking about the way as an African-American woman, a black woman, an African-American woman leading sometimes in systems, if I want to critique something or express, call foul on something, I've found that to be difficult.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Can we talk about that: "I think that actually that might have been sexist," or, you know, "That might've been racist." Oh my God, you cannot speak contrary words to some people. You cannot say "That made me unhappy." You cannot say "My feelings are hurt." The best "I" statements in the world cannot help you get through—

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: --in a place where you're read as angry. You're read as angry before you start talking. So, I think that hit me in both of those places of the complementarity and the community. If the community already has put in the world, Brian, "Black people are angry. Black women are angry. Black women who tell the truth are angry people," you're only palatable if you're just smiling about it. Those things go together for me in a way that I've experienced. Does that make sense, guys? Can you feel that?

Richard Rohr: Oh yes.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, yeah. And, in fact, it really becomes damning, doesn't it, Jacqui, because if we have a system that's oppressing people, of course they're going to be angry.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Brian McLaren: And then when they express their anger, we have a built-in resistance to that, especially if they see, if I take it personally, as I think you're angry at me, then it's very hard for people to receive a message from someone who's angry, which makes it a double bind for— Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Absolutely. And my feeling is that there's so much energy then put in the way of people of color—you have to be palatable; you have to be gentle; you have to be smiling; you can't look fierce or ferocious.—all of that makes a façade that doesn't let us learn. It doesn't let us get to.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes, yes. And this, of course, raises a question that we really need to grapple with in this episode and through the series, how do we overcome these biases? How do we break through? Because it becomes like a hermetically sealed container first because of confirmation bias: I don't want to hear anything that doesn't fit within my system, and I only want simple things. So, if you're going to complexify my life, I'm going to be resistant. And now my whole community wants a certain set of illusions to be upheld. And if you're angry, I'm going to reject you. Man, everything's stacked against a group ever hearing anything.

Richard Rohr: I mean, if we just had these first four, this could change the American conversation that's entrapping us so much now if people would have the freedom and the insight to recognize how unfree they are. It's so disheartening. Of course I look at everything theologically, but it's like, what a risk. Why did God take such a risk to allow us to be so delusional? I just, I can't wait to ask God. [laughter]

We all know people that we even like who are trapped in just these first four or just one of them. And we like them even, but, boy, they can't get out of their self-created or self-accepted box.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes. And when you say, "I wonder why God let this happen," I can just imagine God saying, "Yeah, I have my days I wonder why. [laughter] What was I thinking?" But, you know, however, we work together, you know, the idea of God as creator and the reality of evolution, in a sense, evolution helps me understand how we got into this mess because our ancient, primate ancestors, their secret to success was collaboration, you know. Our species didn't have the longest claws, or the biggest

canine teeth, or we didn't have any of those advantages. Our strength became our ability to communicate and work together. And so, we evolved to be tribal, interdependent creatures. And part of that interdependence means that our brains are more biased to fit in with each other than to actually deal with what's true. And that's where, you know, obviously we don't have to go far to see this in American politics today, but it's a human phenomenon that authoritarian regimes around the world end up creating these little containers with their own set of facts. It's *Animal Farm*. It's 1984. It's all of those realities that are so much part of us. Yes?

Jacqui Lewis: Brian, when you see that—so I'm working on this book, which is part of my torturous, beautiful, fun time this summer—and one of the chapters is "Increasing Your Tribe." So, we are tribal. We are, that's why we survive. But if we could think that our tribe is bigger than the one we currently think, if the Fox News people and the MSNBC people can pick that they're in the same tribe, as opposed to not, for example, to me, I think we're really seeing-- My brothers, I have two brothers who have me in a discipline of making sure I watch news outside of my normal frame. And I'm so grateful because I don't have that much time, but if I don't have a worldview, if I can't put the worldview of the so-called more conservative person, then in my mind-- It's funny, I'm more inclined to put Islam, and Judaism, right, and Buddhism in my worldview than to put in certain kinds of political perspectives. And so, I'm just really trying to challenge myself as a spiritual discipline to see what they see

Brian McLaren: By the way, we're going to get exactly to that, why I think that's the case in the next episode, when we talk about conservative/liberal bias. But, yes, and in fact, whether it's news channels on cable TV, or whether it's websites online, and social media streams, we really can create communities that reinforce all of our biases that help us join in hating all the same people, fearing all the same people, and we can get farther and farther from reality. We can end up in a fantasy world where everyone echoes the same thoughts. And so, we all see things that aren't there, or don't see things that are there.

Richard Rohr: You know, this is allowing me to be more compassionate in this way that I realized even folks who are submitting to their community bias or complementarity bias, they're people who want to be loved, want to be liked, and I just can't stand against my group and experience that alienation being the outlier, the outsider. And if my group is going to love me, if I say this, I'll say it. I'll say it. So, it isn't coming from a malicious desire all the time but a rather understandable one. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: You now, Richard, when I've heard you and others teach about the early Desert Fathers and Mothers, it seems to me something relating to a community and complementarity biases at work here because once the Christian religion had made so many deals with Emperor Constantine and his successors, so that the Church and the Roman Empire were really fused at the hip, it seems to me, people who differed were in a lot of trouble, right? You could be called up as a heretic. You could be thrown in jail. You could be banished. You could have a lot of punishments put upon you by the group because this is the way the tribe works. If you say things, if you claim you see things that our group doesn't want you to see, then we punish you. We do

it without even realizing it. The facial expressions change, body language changes, you stop getting invited to this or that event. We have a thousand ways of doing it. And so, you can see why Christians who weren't happy with the status quo would say I got to get out of here. And then you can see why other people would say there are other people who think a little differently like I do. I'm going to get, even though it means going out in the desert, I'm going to go be with those people because it's too difficult to be in this other setting.

Jacqui Lewis: I think it's true. I think that's, yeah, that sense that the primordial need to belong, that search for the face that won't leave us, the desire to be connected is a really strong biological desire.

Brian McLaren: And it may be that it is impossible for me to know anything totally alone. And it's impossible for me to think anything totally alone, that if I want to think differently from the group that's pressuring me into its community confirmation bias, I've got to find a couple other people to say, "Hey, here's what I'm seeing. Do you see it this alternative way, too?" We often have to create an alternative community that functions a little bit differently

Jacqui Lewis: Or create norms in our community where we're going to be curious. When you said that, Brian, I thought, you know, there are these, I mean at Middle Collegiate Church where we are like the multi, all the things, there is a norm of curiosity about the other. We don't get that right all the time. I'm not saying it to say that, but I'm saying I think a group could decide that it values otherness.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: I think so.

Brian McLaren: But that really becomes something they have to consciously believe in.

Jacqui Lewis: Cultivate, right? Yeah.

Brian McLaren: And, and in a sense, this, I heard once that this was the definition of a pluralist, a pluralist believes that we're better off with diversity and non-pluralists believe, oh, diversity just messes things up.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: I think we've all seen this play out in a hundred different ways when we look back across our own personal and theological biographies. But, you know, I grew up in white Protestantism and the first big other that entered our community was the charismatic movement. And, you know, immediately word went out in our group that were against this, and we don't accept this. And then a few of us started sneaking out at night to charismatic prayer meetings, and we would secretly let other people know. And then a new idea eventually made its way into the community, but it required us to be, well, vulnerable to say, "Hey, I went to this meeting and people told me that these people were crazy, but, boy, there was a lot of love there." That was the first, you know, that I remember experiencing that.

Then I remember when I first had to confront the homophobia of my community and the prejudice against LGBTQ people, and I was afraid. I had friends come out to me and they

were wonderful people. And I thought if I admit that I think that he's a wonderful person then I'm going to go down in the status of my community. Anyway, those are just a couple of places where I've seen it in my own biography. Anything come to mind when you kind of felt the pull of your own community or complementarity bias?

Richard Rohr: All the time. [laughter] We had the advantage or, well, I should say disadvantage, of almost always being in the majority, both whiteness and Catholic being so big, heterosexual appearing to be the norm alone, although now we know it probably wasn't as much as we thought, when you've got the so-called normal or the dominant on your side, how do you break out of it? You know, I think we've all watched these last four years one of our political parties seemingly incapable of criticizing the present president.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Richard Rohr: It's like he can do anything, and you won't hear a peep from them. And many of them are lawyers. Many of them are prosecuting attorneys. And how can the mind go that brain dead? That's how much just having information isn't enlightenment, isn't awareness, isn't even consciousness. It's really helping me be more sympathetic. And you know what, there's a part of me, I don't want to be more sympathetic. [laughter]

Jacqui Lewis: Our community doesn't want us to be sympathetic to that community.

Richard Rohr: Dang it, Richard, don't get too sympathetic. [laughter]

Jacqui Lewis: I think, Richard, you're making such an important point. And I think, again, just as an African-American, female person, cisgendered kind of from a poor family, the "outsider-ness"—I'm trying to make a thought about not being the normative, not being male, white, Catholic, whatever—there's something about the "outsider-ness" that could feel like it's not making the same kind of bias tribe, but actually I think it does as well. I'm trying to take a risk to say, you know, black people in this nation can feel like it's being disloyal to not be only pro-black. There can be pressure on queer people to be in the queer church, not the everybody church. Do you know what I mean?

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: So, this same kind of survival by circling up our wagons happens for people on the margins as well, and in some ways people on the margins might feel a stronger need to stay together to survive. Jewish families who don't marry outside of Judaism, or something, you know, for an example of what I'm thinking.

Brian McLaren: Yes, that's right. So, I want to add one more bias to our mix of social knowing and social seeing in just a minute, but first I just think I want to let that comment sink in, Jacqui, and it really creates to me almost a need to take a walk and just let that thought sink in for me as an individual and maybe for each person who's listening to say who am I and what are the groups I'm part of and how do they become self-enclosed groups, and we're only allowed to see certain things and say certain things? And if I'm a majority, it affects me in one way. If I'm in a minority, it affects me in another way,

Jacqui, years ago, you gave me a book that really has helped me on racial identity theory. And, and what that book helped me understand is that to be a racial minority, for example, in a white, dominant culture, there is a process where a child grows up and thinks, “Well, I’m just a child. I’m the beloved child of my parents.” And then the child has to become aware, hold it, there’s something about my skin color or my, you know, first language, or whatever, that makes me different, and then they have to go through this process of reconciling their identity as a beloved child in this close-knit, wonderful family, with this hostility from the outside.

Jacqui Lewis: Right.

Brian McLaren: And that’s something that white people almost never have to do.

Jacqui Lewis: Never. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: That’s right.

Brian McLaren: A black pastor said to me recently, “The hardest thing about my job is that I’m the pastor of a church of mostly white people who don’t know they’re white.” [laughter]

Jacqui Lewis: Oh, wow.

Brian McLaren: Meaning they’ve never had to come to terms with the fact that they actually belong to a group.

Jacqui Lewis: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That’s such a good point. When I was first out of seminary, and, you know, I’m embarrassed to say, but I had never asked myself as a young adult living and working in the world until I was thirty, anything about gay, It just didn’t cross my mind. It wasn’t in my mind. Of course, there were gay people. I didn’t have a theological wrestling with it, I just didn’t until I got to Princeton and everything was about yellow ribbons and who can get ordained, and who’s-- I was like, “What is going on?” But the Bible says-- The Bible says-- Where does it say it? [laughter] I had no idea.

So, you know, you’re looking up these seven or eight texts and you’re getting your hermeneutical groove on and trying to figure out what you really think. So, I took my new wisdom to my family reunion that summer and all my, with it, progressive black cousins, you know, all sitting around playing cards. And I’m saying, “Guys, did you know that there are Scriptures in the Bible that say things about gay people? And have you ever read them? And what do you think?” And they were like, “It just says it’s wrong.” I said, “Well, where? Let’s talk about it.” To make a long story short, that whole weekend was this [bomb sound] blowing up of, “Jacqui’s not Christian enough.”

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: Because I was no longer anti-gay. I was never anti-gay, but that was the community, or the tribal perspective. Do you feel me?

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes.

Jacqui Lewis: I was like, “I decry that.” And so, then I wasn’t in the Christian club enough for moving

theologically left. This is the kind of movement that happens all the time for us. And even in the evidence of things that could change our minds and crack our hearts wide open, we don't feel safe to move because we'll feel rejected by our kin.

Brian McLaren: Yes. There it is. There it is. Well, I want to introduce one last, one more bias under the social category that we've already touched on. And, Jacqui, your story is the perfect segue into it, and that is contact bias. If we don't have contact with a person, or a kind of person, or a group of people, then we can't see what they see. It's sort of obvious. And the data on this, I don't have the numbers right at hand, but it would be easy for anyone to look up. I come from a white, Evangelical background. If you look at white Evangelicals who have zero gay friends, and then compare it to white Evangelicals who have one, two, or three gay friends, what happens is just having a couple of gay friends begins to change people statistically, you know, because now we have contact. And here's the way that groups, it seems to me, become so dangerous, our groupthink becomes so dangerous. If I'm told that anyone who's of a certain category—gay, Muslim, Jewish, atheist, Buddhist, whatever, right—it's "They're dangerous. They're of the devil. They're—" You know, it's a slippery slope. My only context with them can be to try to convert them, to try to convince them they're wrong, or I'm always on my guard.

But when I open my life and open my heart to receive them as a human being, I show hospitality to them. I actually love them as my neighbor. I love them as myself. Now I'm exposed to contact and that puts me into conflict with my community and their assumptions. That's what happened to you that weekend?

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Richard Rohr: So many people who come through the Living School here have stories like that. In fact, almost all of them that it was contact with a good, virtuous, admirable person outside of their select group. Something has to puncture your false certitude of superiority. I bet we're probably going to get to that yet. But, yeah, what you just said is so true in my experience with the students here.

Brian McLaren: Yes. You know, Richard, you, I think, hit the nail on the head for this in something that I've heard you say many times, and each time you say it, it just rings true. And that is that we tend to stay stuck in our first half of life, in our very simplistic confirmation bias circle until great love or great suffering breaks us out of it.

Jacqui Lewis: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Beautiful.

Brian McLaren: And so, we meet someone from outside of our group. We have contact with them and we experience great love for them, and we see that what Jim Finley calls, the deathless beauty in them. And now we go back into our community and we can't live with the bias that we had before that our community shared. So, great love and then great suffering because life isn't as simple, we break through the complexity bias of our group and my suffering doesn't fit within the framework I was given and that's, you know, held by my community.

I would also add something that happens a lot to Christians, I think, is they go on a mission trip where they go as missionaries and the travel brings them into another culture where they make actual contact with people and now their community bias is broken. And it's

disrupting, and it's terrifying, and it's painful, but it's also liberating. And I think that's the, I guess, the blessing and the curse of this, isn't it? If we help people break out of their community bias and their complementarity bias, we make their lives more difficult.

Jacqui Lewis: That's right. Contact is disruptive, but it's also joyful. Like, how do we help cultivate it, like, a holy curiosity, you know, for the other so that we—

Richard Rohr: And when missionaries don't let that happen to them but dig in their heels deeper, that "I'm here to change those people," and they re-fortify their certitudes, the damage they have done in history. And I'm just aware of that belonging to an 900-year-old Order. Well-intentioned people came to the New World and their job was not really to love the natives very often—some, it seems it was—but to change them. My, they did damage. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Yeah. And in a sense, I say this very hesitantly, I think it's true, but it's painful. The act of converting someone meant inducting them into the colonizing group's confirmation and community bias.

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes. That's really well said. Sad, but true.

Brian McLaren: Yeah. You know, one last thing before we finish for today because next time we're going to go really deep into the world of politics, but it's interesting, isn't it, that when you have a community that's a political party and you have a culture-war mindset, so anyone who disagrees with you is evil and of the devil and must be defeated and conquered, then every time they bring up a subject, you attack them or you do a gotcha question and expose them, and so all of our relationships with one another across difference, are relationships of hostility, and aggression, and colonization in a way, or at least competition. So that means then that everyone who has an experience of my community on the other side, all they see of us is mean people who like to prove them wrong and call them names. And this goes both ways—

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: Right. That's right.

Brian McLaren: --which just keeps us reinforcing our groups. That we're all nice. Everybody's nice here on my side, and everybody I meet on the other side is so mean.

Richard Rohr: Is so mean.

Jacqui Lewis: That is so true.

Brian McLaren: Part of our challenge then is for all of us to have it-- I love that phrase you've used a few times Jacqui, about a face. How do you say it? "A loving face that won't leave me."

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah. We long for the face that will not leave us. We long for the face that will never leave us.

Richard Rohr: Lovely. Lovely.

Jacqui Lewis: Yeah, isn't that great? Jim Loder, I give him credit for that. But, yeah, I think that's what we want. And if what we could learn, also, I'm going to go down like a ten-second road, we become adults because we get frustrated around that. Like, the face does leave us, you know, the face doesn't leave us. The bottle doesn't come. But you know, suddenly you're not going to be on the breast. So, it's the beautiful frustration along the way that finds out that we've survived the different; we survive the absence of the face and then it comes back. That's actually what makes us grow up. So how do we help each other learn to be okay with conflict? How do we help each other learn to be okay with rejection? How do we help each other be okay with, you know, the space between the now and the not yet? I think that feels like it's filled with terror and rejection, but maybe it's filled with wonder, and maybe it's filled with surprise. [music]

Brian McLaren: Beautiful. Thank you very much, my friends.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you.

Richard Rohr: Thank you both very much.

Yvette Trujillo: Learning How to See was adapted from Brian's e-book, Why Don't They Get It? available@brianmclaren.net. Brian McLaren, Jacqui Lewis, and Richard Rohr have been your hosts for this conversation. Other members of the team that helped make this possible were Corey Pigg, Paul Swanson, Izzy Spitz, Sarah Palmer, Jenna Keiper, Nicholas Kramer, Lisa Powell, and I'm Yvette Trujillo.

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