

410 | Percolating on Faith | Deconstructing Faith From Chaos to Peace
Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long 00:33

Hello and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and today I have my two wonderful guests back with me. I have Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:45

Hi, Carla. We're glad to be here with you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:48

Hello, Carla. Nice to see your face on Zoom.

Carla Long 00:51

And if I have these two crazy friends on the podcast, you know that you're listening to Percolating on Faith where we talk about all sorts of theological stuff. And it makes me feel really, really smart for about 30 minutes afterwards and then I forget everything anyway. So, uh, today, we're going to be talking about deconstructing faith. Uh, the title of this podcast is actually Deconstructing Faith: From Chaos to Peace. And I, I actually am ex, really excited about talking about this because I work with a lot of seekers, right, a lot of people who are leaving their faith and joining Community of Christ. And so I see this happen all the time. But I can't really name it all the time. I can, I can name some parts of it. But I don't know exactly what to talk to them about exactly. Because while I've gone through my own deconstructing process, and I think all of us probably have, mine was a, was just like a little molehill versus an Everest that some people have to deconstruct. So, um, I'm really looking forward to hearing more about this. And I'm, I'm curious about what we're going to talk about. So, I want to put names to these things. This is exciting. So, I'm gonna' let you just take it away and, um, you two go for it and we'll just talk, uh, in general about deconstructing faith.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:01

Good, good. And feel free to, you know, throw in questions or, or people's stories as, as we go. I think one of the things that we want to say right up front is that everyone's journey is different. And, so, this isn't intended to pretend that we can capture the realities of everyone's journey. But, but it may be helpful. It may give some, some tools and some words to describe these different parts. Um, these different places where, where you are, where you're struggling, or where you're finding new freedom, or where, where you're questioning and still questioning and wait, still questioning things. And, so, to know that that's all normal. So, first, we don't assume we've got, we'll, we'll describe everybody's experience, but we hope we can describe some things that people can identify with. And that might be helpful in this

whole process that many, many, many people go through, whether it's in a more quiet, gentle way of letting go and picking up or in a rou, in someti, sometimes very traumatic ways. So, we're gonna start with Tony (Uh, huh.) sharing a little bit about his, um, spiritual journey and some of the places where there was deconstruction.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:19

Yeah. So, uh, I had a, a fairly, I would say, a fairly difficult and long period of deconstruction. I started off my journey as a child in the United Methodist Church. My family went to the Methodist Church. We were supporters and were there pretty much every Sunday. My mother was heavily involved in vacation church school there in, in summer. So, it was a important part of our lives. When I was about 11, uh, between sixth and seventh grade, family chaos. So, a whole bunch of things that happened just stopped our church attendance. And so from the time, from the time I was 12 until I was a university freshman, it was like bonus prize, no church for Tony. It was, it was, uh, I was, I was free from, free from going to church for all those years, junior high and high school. So, my freshman year of university, I had a series of personal struggles and experiences that sent me back looking in a faith direction. And I'm going to make some long stories very short here. But the first thing that happened to me was I started going to a Baptist Church and my motives weren't pure because I was going to the church that an ex-girlfriend went to, so I had some kind of vain hopes of reconnecting. But something happened to me in a service in that church that was a life changing experience. And, and, so, from that, from that point on, uh, I, I was, I'd become serious about Christianity. Whatever Christianity I learned as a kid in the Methodist Church was now becoming affective in me and, and what happened next was I quickly discovered something I didn't know. I discovered that I had a family history in the RLDS church, Reorganized Latter Day Saints, ie, Community of Christ's old name. Discovered that I, I actually was a, would have, was going to become the fourth generation of, of people in my family to join the church. My dad was an inactive member. I had no idea growing up. So, I joined the RLDS church through the help of a very charismatic RLDS seventy in Michigan named John Wolf. He was, he was a high school teacher. I'd had him in high school for several classes and loved him as a teacher. Um, he knew my grandpa Smith, who was a member, an active member of a local RLDS congregation. So, so, I started hanging around John. I started going to visit John as a college, uh, freshman because I had all kinds of questions about all kinds of things. And he was somebody I trusted in high school. But he slowly began introducing me to my own church heritage that I didn't know about. And before long, this sort of, this was in February, 1975, I was baptized into the RLDS church on a very cold February night in, in Central Michigan. Alright, so I mentioned John was charismatic. He was well read. He was absolutely passionate about the one true church theology of the Reorganization at that time. So, he was one of those self-sustaining local ministers who was kind of suspicious of what was coming out of church headquarters at the time, right? There was a lot of that as this is the 1970s, right? And so the 19, the 1960s rethinking of the Reorganization's message, it was getting out, but people on the ground in places like Central Michigan were, were, uh, suspicious and cautious and were still going around teaching the old, the old preaching chart theology though using, uh, using slides and the slide projector to teach it. And I just simply fell in love with everything John said. I took it completely in. I was now a member of the one true, real Christian church. And imagined my whole future in that. I know, I bought it all. I bought the Joseph Smith tells his own story. I bought the traditional view of the Book of Mormon. I bought everything that was being sold. I, I bought double. So, everything was so deeply, passionately committed myself to that. And at the same time, something that was happening in me was a new sense

of calling that was directing me in an odd direction for people in that era. And that was towards preparing for theological study. That was not common in the 1970s among church members. So, um, you know, I, I hung in there with all of that. And then there was a point where questions began to emerge. This is a few years into the process, right? Everything was new, fresh, beautiful. It was all true, I bought it all. It was amazing. And I thought, I thought everybody else who wasn't part of this was less than and, you know, gave me this kind of sense of being in the know and being superior and so on. And it gave me a, a deep sense of calling, which I still have. But then what happened was, the questions began to emerge. The, the, you know, if you, if you look, if you look at a paint, a great painting from a distance, it's magnificent. When you get up close, you start seeing the flaws and the cracks in it. And so the closer I got, the more I began to see, Oh, Joseph Smith's story, there are some things that don't hold up here. Book of Mormon, no, there's some serious questions about whether it's an ancient American document. In fact, it kinda looks like it's not. The church's priesthood structure, Why I don't know if that's actually in the New Testament in that way. So, so, things, things began to unravel for me. And, for me, the deconstruction process started there. And it puts you in a real bind because here you've, you've given your whole self deeply to this whole thing that you think is the truth. And all of a sudden, you realize, Eh, some of it's not as true as I thought. Some of it's not true at all. And what have I done? What, what, Oh my gosh, was this, was this like the (. . .)? Yes. And there was this like a colossal life mistake. And, so, that's, for me, where the deconstruction process was beginning. And, uh, again, to make a long, long, long story short, the, one of the, is there some things I could hold on to in this process. And one was the relationships, people who supported me in the midst of that, church members who supported me in the midst of that. And people in the church who helped me see that there was more to the church than the story I had learned. And my own deep experiences of God that I'd had, you know, at reunions and, and church, in worship services and in sacraments, and so on. Those experiences were still speaking to me. And, so, basically, then what I'm faced with is, I'm, I'm faced with a mess. On the one hand, there's all these, all of these things that are now just question marks and seem not, not plausible and even not true. On the other hand, there's these things that seem like they're, they've been really valid and life changing. And so what do I do? And so that's, that's where the deconstruction process began and where it led me to the process of, of sorting and sifting, uh, uh, which took a long time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:10

And if, and if I can just add one more piece is that Tony was very fortunate that while he was going through this process, many other church members were going through this process. The church was going through this process. And so, um, there wasn't, uh, except for some very conservative people in the church, there wasn't any punishing of him for questioning and for having a bigger view, in fact. Um, then his going on into theological education, um, was actually quite consistent with the theological education that was happening to the church as far as our understanding of the whole of Christianity. So, so, there was support along the way, as well, because the whole movement was, in some ways, going through some of those same kinds of, of, um, of deconstructing. I mean, as a church, it was, we, that's what we were doing at that time, as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:16

And so I, you know, those, those people, those church members who were supportive, and also the theological tools I was slowly gaining through theological education, were, were giving me some

resources for how to process things going forward. And the relationships were really an important part of that. And also in, in the midst of some of that is when Charmaine and I met. And she, she had then and has now a real sense of wisdom about a lot of these things. And so that was really very important to me for how to, you know, she was very helpful in me processing my way through that. Um, honestly, there were times when I thought, I need to check this thing. This, this Restoration thing is nothing but a pain in my soul. And in other parts, too. But, but, uh, the relationships, some of the past experiences, and the tools I was gaining, and being married to a very wise and loving person, those things sort of helped me hang in there, um, helped me hang in there with, with the hope that I could find additional ways to reconstruct my faith which has kind of been the, the process that developed eventually. So, but it was very painful. It's very frightening, too. Like, so, if you, if you're, if, if you begin to associate God with your own sense of certainty about the truth of the things you have been led to believe and all of a sudden you find yourself saying, I don't think I believe those things, then how does, what does that do to your relationship with God? It was very, very threatening and frightening, right? Am I making, by asking these questions which I can't now avoid, by doubting these things which I can't not doubt, am I jeopardizing how God sees me? That was one of the kind of existential crises in the midst of all of that. It was, and as difficult and painful, but being surrounded by loving people who represent a loving God is a real helpful antidote to that.

Carla Long 14:16

So I, I'm really, really glad you told that story, Tony, because, obviously, you're a brilliant guy. And, like, um, I think it's really good for people to hear that, um, deconstructing your faith and reconstructing your faith is something that anybody can do and you can also grow and, and you could, that's, I think that's an important piece, right? Like you can grow and learn so much more and become a professor in your new faith. So, I think it's really important that you, I'm really glad that you told that story so that people could hear that, um, because, um, people out here are actually quite shocked when I say I've been Community of Christ my whole life. They can't believe that that is true, you know? And I'm not exactly sure why, but they're just shocked every single time I, I say it. Um, and I, I also feel like I want to understand what people go through when they, um, have a faith transition. I want to understand it and I don't think I ever will. So, continually hearing those stories like from you, Tony, or hearing stories from people in a faith transition is so important for everyone to understand because it is a painful process and it can be very hurtful. It can also be very freeing. There's a lot of things that can be happening from it. So, anyway, so can we talk about maybe the different steps or are there steps, you know, to, for going through a deconstruction process?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:40

There's an author Paul Ricoeur, talks about, about this and gives us three steps. And as we were talking about this today, we, we decided that one of the steps really needs some subset steps. So, you're getting a bonus.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:54

And Paul Ricoeur was a philosopher of religion. Taught at University of Chicago. Some of his best and most complicated work has to do with hermeneutics or this, the art of interpretation of texts and traditions. But, but this, but he has this great saying in one of his books where he, where he says, quote, Beyond the deserts of criticism, we wish to be called again. It's a beautiful, brilliant quote that is,

that, that, that the critique of our own faith and our own tradition is a desert experience. But it's not all there is. Beyond, beyond that is the yearning to experience divine call again and I think that's

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:35

Maybe, maybe even in that and under that the way, the reason we do that critical study is so we can hear that. I mean, I think that's, that's his, his message. And I, I think one of the things that we'll probably come back to, but I want to make sure it gets said, is that the deconstructing doesn't start all at once, and it doesn't end all at once either. In fact, it's quite likely that some of the pain or angst or uncertainty that comes with deconstruction, may, may be with us throughout our lives. And, and that's, that's okay to, to acknowledge that, that it's not, uh, the process that always just gets totally resolved. But that sometimes those questions or uneasy places are actually what causes us to strive more deeply to be connected with God. So, um, to, to, to see the positives in it, but also to recognize that it's a pro, a long process quite often.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:38

So this, this Ri, Ricoeurian description of the process, uh, we'll, we'll give you the, we'll give you the terms and then we're going to work through each of them. So, uh, it starts off with what Ricoeur calls first naivete, right, first naivete. You, you're, you're naive, you're naive experience and acceptance of the things you're first taught. Then there's the critical moment which turns out to be critical moments which turns out to be (critical years). The critique, right? And then the process, if, if you are willing, can eventually lead to what Ricoeur called second naivete or tested naivete, and have a whole new level of commitment and acceptance and a, and openness to the experience. So, we're, we're going to work through each of those as part of the steps of this process.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:34

And in that second naivete, it's not, it's not just a recreation of the first naivete, but it's, it's holding loosely the ambiguities and the, and the questions. And it's, um, a time when we're, we become humbled by God's presence in ways we can't fully understand. So there's a kind of being at peace with, with some of the unanswerable questions. Some of the things where we can't control God. So, anyhow, that's just a little bit more about that description of a second naivete. And it's not just, it's not just the first re, we're just not going back to the first.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:17

So, first, first level naivete is pretty straightforward, right? It's you, this, this may have, this, this happened to me, you know, as an 18 year old learning about the RLDS church, but it may happen to people just growing up in a church and it starts off with the kind of a straightforward acceptance of the religious claims and traditions that you're given. Right? You just accept them at face value.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:39

It's, it's what you've learned. It's what you've absorbed. And so it shapes your, your very reality. How you see the world is shaped by this religious stuff that you just took in because that's what you do as a human being--you take in the reality that, as perceived and taught by those around you. And so you, it, it now, it shapes how you see the created world around you, the natural world. It, it helps you, uh, it shapes how you see yourself. It shapes how you see God. It shapes how you see the purpose of being

here on the earth. All those kinds of things. And, and you usually don't question it, you know? As children and youth and young adults, um, we, we absorb it and just think, well, that's the way things are, of course, it makes so much sense because it's the only sense we have. The only things we have to make sense of the world with. Um, and so we, that's what we do.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:39

Yeah, I mean, first, first naivete is characterized by an automatic assumption that everything I've learned is true. It's true on a very straightforward level and (That's just the way it is.) it's complete, it's verifiable. This is reality. This is how things really are. And in first, in first level naivete, then there's this personal investment in it, right? Like, say, I understand the truth about everything. Yes, there was really a Noah and there was really an arc. And, and, and

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:13

Because I was told those stories (Right.) and that's, so they must be historical and,

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:19

And Joseph really was strong, young, righteous prophet and could do no wrong and etc., etc. We, you just, you take it all at face value and as Charmaine said, it, it kind of gives you these lenses that you start looking at everything with. And also included in the first level naivete is, there's, there's a sense that I am privileged because I have the truth and there's a lot of benighted people around me that don't, right? There's, there, people in other religious traditions are less than because they don't have what I have.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:52

So here's a, you know, really good example of this and I'm sure I've used it in other settings, but it's one that really stands out to me. When I was in high school and a good friend of ours, um, were in the same grade. We, she was about to be baptized in a Baptist Church. And so we were talking about things. And it became apparent that for each of us, we were surprised, shocked, and maybe even a little disgusted at what each other believed because we assumed that what we believed was the most logical thing for them to, you know, for people to believe. We had no way of really knowing how to even discuss that. But I think we were both kind of shocked at what we realized the other believed as being the obvious truth of who God was, or what religion was, what Christianity was supposed to be about. So, I think we come to those moments so often in our, you know, junior high, high school years and for those who have just absorbed what's been taught to them.

Carla Long 22:59

This is probably why, um, it's important to have ecumenical friends or interfaith friends, because, I mean, if we just assume we're always right, and everything's perfect, where we are, how will we ever grow? How will we ever learn more and grow and, and be like, Oh, I never thought about God that way. And you can either accept it, or you can be like, I'm not gonna think about God that way. So, so this ecumenical stuff that Community of Christ does, I think, is pretty important.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:25

Right, right. And, and back, back in the church that I joined in 1975, we were just, just stepping into ecumenical waters. And

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:34

There were still lots of big shields up and (Oh, yeah.) walls up to where for a very long time, we had warned our children and our youth about going to other churches or listening to what other people had to say because, you know, we had the truth and anything less would lead us astray.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:51

They, those were the churches of men. That's how it was said. (That's right.) And we had the one church that was of God and was from Revelation, etc. There's another thing about first naivete is it's very comfortable. (Yes.) It makes you feel secure. It's comforting. And religious institutions have a vested interest in keeping people at a first level of naivete. Very amazingly, Community of Christ leaders in the 1960s and 70s were willing to shed that, were willing to, to move away from that and of course created lots of great, uh, discomfort and discord, but, but for lots and lots and lots of people religion is about comfort. And first, first let, you know, don't confuse me with any Bible criticism. Don't confuse me with history. My religion makes me feel safe. And don't confuse me with the facts. So, so that's, that's where first level naivete is. And some people never, ever have the next thing happen, which is the critical moments.

Carla Long 24:55

I will say that, um, you two have seen me in my critical moments because my critical moments happened in your courses, like, seriously, as an undergrad and in my seminary experience, I had some very critical moments. And I probably kept it together pretty well because I'm such a cool cat. But, you know, those critical moments are, uh, they, they come at ya'. They can hit you.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:24

And it, and it comes when you are either forced or choose to put yourself into some new settings where the questions can't simply be dismissed, or you choose to not just dismiss the questions, where there's a part of you that says, I, I think there's more. Um, or there's some things that I'm seeing that are very disturbing to me and I see that they're connected with beliefs or teachings that I grew up with. Some, or some worldviews that I grew up with and, and that doesn't seem right now. And, so, it, it's often not a conscious choice to move into this critical moment. (Right.) We may feel called into something, but we don't know we are getting called into the critical moment. And, so, but ultimately from, for many of us, we can't avoid it. If we want to keep growing, if we want to be open to God, if we want to be open to others' experience, if we want to be open to a sense of call for the good of the world. Some things are start, going to start to clash within us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:37

So think of, think of the critical moment as a kind of explosion or series of explosions, explosions in the boiler kind of where. So, these can happen with new ideas, or new, new discoveries. For example, up, uh, back in the 60s, when RLDS Community of Christ, people were had begun studying the Bible critically, it's like, Oh, my gosh, the book of Isaiah, which is quoted extensively in the Book of Mormon,

the book of Isaiah is multiple, authored and huge chunks of the book of Isaiah were written after the exile had started. So, what does that mean then about the Book of Mormon? Right? It can't possibly, it can't possibly be an ancient historical document if it's quoting, if it's quoting biblical texts that weren't even written yet, right? So, it can happen that way, but, you know what, it doesn't even have to happen by ideas. Right? Some, sometimes the critical moment happens to first, first level naive people who are being faithful to what they know and it's, it happens with an accident. It happens with an illness. It happens, it happens with, uh, an administration that doesn't heal people. It, it happens. There're all kinds of things that can explode people's faith without ever having cracked a theology book.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:55

And some of them are amazing things, too. Positive things where you, where you recognize the Spirit that you've come to know as working with other people in amazing ways and who are not of your own thinking or of your own religion. And, so, you, you begin to recognize that, um, the love of God, the movement of the Spirit, is at work in other people and it's exciting and frightening at the same time.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:27

Yeah, and I can say that, you know, for me, part of that was when, when I got to my first year of seminary, Master of Divinity, Divinity study, out on the east coast, I'm surrounded by, at the time it was mostly guys, but there were women, women seminary students in the, you know, late in the 1970, late 1970s, but mostly guys still. I was surrounded by guys who were Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, American Baptist. And I listened to them and I thought, Oh, my gosh, God is just as real to them as to me. Their experiences of calling are both unlike, but also like mine. They, they're, they're not, they're not in this for the money. They're, uh, they, you know, that to recognize, to recognize that divine calling was not something that happened only in the RLDS priesthood structure was a, was a pleasant surprise, a shocker, but, you know, part of the deconstructing process for me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:21

So, we've broken this, the critical moment, what Ricoeur calls the critical moment, we've, we've called it the critical moments. And we kind of have three, um, subsections and the, and the first one is this one that we've been describing--the questioning. The, the new experience, the new insights, the new information, and what are we, what will we do with that? The, the second part of that is, is decisions. So, the first time is questions, the second section is decisions. What do we do with this new experience, these questions or this new information? And in, typically in this part of the critical moment, people have the, a decision to make. They, they're either going to stay where they are, and sometimes quell the questions and the experiences that they have, separate them off and just suppress them. Um, they can walk away from religion altogether. As, you know, it's like, this is, this is a bunch of stuff that, that isn't helpful for me or the world and why would I even want to be associated with it. So, in, in the critical moment, people, some people just leave the organized religion altogether and even maybe become antagonistic towards any kind of organized religion. Uh, and then a third thing is to seek, another possibility is to seek a new religious path, either within the structure that you've already been in or outside of it. And, um, with that comes a whole nother set of realities. This is often the place where there's the most chaos. Um, there is chaos with the questioning, but in some ways, that's passive. It's, it's a gathering of information and experiences. But then when you decide to act on it, then it breaks loose a lot of stuff in people.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:33

So, the, you know, that, the first of those decisions Charmaine mentioned where people say, All right, these questions have come up. They're really difficult, but I'm just going to, I'm just going to turn my back on them and just stay where I'm at. I'm going to, I'm going to force myself to stay first naive regardless of, it, it kind of reminds me of my favorite line from the Wizard of Oz, Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. It's like, all of a sudden, you're, the question raises the man behind the curtain or the man, or the man looking into the hat, if you will. And, and it's like, Uh, that, you know, it's a question, but hey, I, I don't want to not have the comfort I've had in first naive so I'm just going to ignore. I'm going to stick my head in the sand and ignore. That's, that is a real choice that some people make when they come to this, this level. And, and then also, that's, that's second possibility there about leaving organized religion altogether. We see that a lot. And, and one of, one of the, one of the constant things you hear there is that, I have been lied to, right? I have been lied to and so I don't want to stay where I'm being lied to.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:42

And why would I trust any other organization like that whose primary purpose may, may simply be to, to want numbers and (. . .), you know, my money, my presence, my, my service, but, but not be honest with me.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:59

And, and, and it's perfectly okay to, I mean, I wondered that, too. I, you know, when I started discovering things about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon and the church's history and so on, I thought, Oh, bless you, John Wolf. You're such a wonderful minister, but you, did you tell me falsehoods? And you, you're not in a, at this point, you're not in a, not in a position to get, to be able to say, you're not yet in a position to be able to say, Nah, you shared, you shared the best you had with me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:28

You had, yeah, you shared what you, what you knew.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:31

You're not, you're not there yet.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:32

And you were generous with him. John shared what he had. And yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:37

If you, if you follow the process, you, you, you can get there. But you're not going to be there. You're not going to be there at this point.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:44

Of being generous to people who had, who had shared what they had. But yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:48

(Right.) So, so, so there's questions, decisions, uh, and then movement.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:55

And then movement. Movement is where the chaos of feelings and questions take you. And part of that is the letting go and the picking up. You find, you're finding these places within you that, that are clashing, you know, this new information is clashing with some of the things you were taught. Um, someone else's experience is clashing with yours. Um, and so there's this, a lot of internal work as you're, um, as you, you decide what direction you're going to move with this. And there isn't always clarity. Um, it's kind of, it's kind of like trying to, trying to move out of a house at the same time as someone else is moving in. And, you know, whose boxes are which and which ones were we, what furniture we leaving behind? You know, all of that kind of stuff. It's just that, that we don't know yet. We can't see clearly yet. And I think that's just an important thing to acknowledge that that's, that's hard. That's hard. And, um, it's a time to keep looking for those things that you know for sure. What is foundational to, to my understanding who I am? What is foundational to my understanding of who God is? Um, and to keep trying to figure out what is foundational. Um, quite often the list of beliefs that we inherited, they're typically not foundational. Um, they are, they are, they are the accessories to what we believe. And so, but that's part of what you're going to have to figure out in that part is what is, what is core to my, to my beliefs?

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:49

For, for me in that part of the process, uh, one of the things I discovered was that essential Christian faith was still my faith. And what I had to figure out how to do was how do I, how do I make sense of both the value of my Community of Christ experience and the things about the restoration tradition that are problematic, troubling and simply not true? What do I, how do I balance those things. And so, it, for me it became the process of, of, a long process of creating synthesis, a synthesis of the best things I had picked up from Community of Christ. And, by the way, it's ongoing. Still picking up. And what I, what I still imagine as essential Christian faith, what, what it's about. And, so, that was, that, for me, was part of the long movement there. And that took, that took all the way through grad school, still working on that. And, and actually, it was a process ongoingly for us as we started working for the church as theologians in residence. And increasingly, as I became a professional theologian, that's an ongoing, ongoing thing, that synth, creating that synthesis. And, so, now at this, at this point, you know, we'll, we'll, we'll come to the third stage here in a minute. But at this point, I would say, you know, there's a whole bunch of stuff about Community of Christ as it is now that I am so glad I stayed for. So, we can talk about that eventually here.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:25

Yeah. So, another part of this movement, and, and I think as those who are observing and supporting people who are going through this process, is to recognize that, um, because of the, the uncertainty of this whole process, as people move into a new kind of setting, whether within their own denomination or in something new, is, is that some people are going to be very tentative. You know, they've been, they've been burned. They've felt like they've been deceived or that they've been taught things that weren't accurate. They're going to be very, very tentative about committing to investing in, in a new place, while others are going to super enthusiastically embrace everything because they're, they're,

they're longing again for something absolute, you know, an absolute kind of security and maybe in embracing it too vigorously. Um, you know, that sometimes that the zealotry of, of new converts that, you know, it's, I'm, I'm leaving that thing and coming into this other thing that I'm sure now is perfect. Um, and, and then the disillusionment will, it will happen again, um, and the deconstructing. But that's just something as, as we're either companionship people through that process or supporting or observing is to recognize some will be very tentative, some will be, uh, just, just want the security of being held completely in a new system that will fit all of their things.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:13

Um, and to, and to, to add something to that, too, in terms of in these different parts of the critical moment, it's important to, to recognize that, that those who are still in first naivete and who also have a vested interest in keeping everybody at first naivete, they will look at any part of the critical moment and someone as dangerous to the others. As you're abandoning, you're denying the faith, you're becoming apostate

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:41

And they will, and that's not unusual language. It's they're so threatened by that, that they will warn you against going any further, um, because, and they will even say, This is moving you outside of God's reach. (Um-hmm.)

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:58

And they will treat you as if you are a contaminant, right? (To others around you.) Right. And, so, uh, the, there's, it, unless, unless you back up, uh, (Meaning go back to) go back to first naivete, you will be, you will often then be treated as, um, (A pariah.) as a pariah. As, as kind of a, a theological leper to be avoided, right? And, so, so it's, it can be very isolating. If you don't have a community in this, in this part of the process, it can be very isolating for you.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:28

And the process (. . .) and the reaction that Tony's talking about is primarily in denominations or groups that are absolutist, that do believe that they have the own, only truth, and the, and the only picture of how things really should be. Um, other denominations that, that can see God at work in other denominations, uh, typically are not as threatened by this part of the, of the, um, process. So, there's some other pieces, though, that are more at the spiritual and emotional area in this movement part that we've talked about in the critical moment. Anger, anger is a companion in much of this time. Um, and it's all mixed, right? Sometimes the anger is that you had to leave. Um, and whose fault is it that you had to leave where, where you were so comfortable? Who to trust, anger at, at not knowing now who you can trust. Um, anger at the church, anger at the systems, anger at them, whoever they is, anger at yourself for being taken in or for trusting too much or for not seeing sooner the inconsistencies. Being angry at God. Um, how, how did, how did God let me get into this place where I don't even know anymore who God is. You know, it's, there's a lot of anger. And there'll be anger that will come with them into new situations as well in, as they're trying to find a new place to, um, to grow spiritually. There will be anger that will come, um, when the same kinds of questions that they had initially can't be answered by that group. Or that there can't be assurance that they have the right answers either. So, uh, it's just a, a natural part of that process to understand in ourselves and others. And another part of

this movement part is that now, so, as, you know, in the first naivete we just take in all the ideas into our heads and our hearts and we're just fine with it because that's how it is. But now, we're wanting our faith to be effective on more levels, like on reason, you know, the reason of the level of reason and truth, truthfulness, or factualness. Um, we, we want our faith or our beliefs to be tied in with how we treat the world or other people. So, we've engaged that part. Um, and is this belief, um, does it make sense? What does it produce? And, so, there's all of these different parts of ourself now that are engaged in this process of our spiritual journey. And, so, um, so more levels mean that there are more levels to satisfy as well. And so trying to find a new place to be, there's a lot more criteria than there were at the, in the beginning when we first were learning faith. So, uh, that's just something to recognize. It's like, Why is this so complicated? You know, it's a question. It's like, Why, why can't I just accept this thing now? I've given up that one. And it's, well, it's because now, you, you want this in a different way. You want it to satisfy your thinking and your interactions with others in your relationships and your understanding of what salvation is or what your understanding of what love is or responsibility is for the world. I mean, so, that's one of the complications.

Carla Long 44:29

And you've been hurt before, right? Like you were really, really hurt that first time and you don't want to be hurt again. So, you have these walls built up and they have to jump, make sure they can jump over the wall and make it in there. It's, it's pretty scary. Go ahead, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:40

(. . .) Well, there's a, there's such a thing as religious PTSD. I mean, it's like you've been so damaged or wounded by the first level of naivete and your, and your discoveries that you couldn't, you couldn't stay there that you just want nothing to do with it. And so, so, yeah, it can be, it, it, this can be very emotionally complicated and it can take a long time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:03

Yeah. And there's always, there's often, um, even after a long time, these, these questions that are these little annoying questions under the surface, like, Did my leaving this way of thinking, does that say something about my loyalty? You know, If I'd just been more loyal, um, would this maybe not have happened? And what if I'm wrong? That back there seemed so, so wonderful. It was all, it was, you know, this, all that, there were no loose ends. It was a, a theology or way of thinking that, that was so, so simple. And what if how I'm thinking about things now is wrong.

Carla Long 45:46

Yeah, I just wanted to add something there. Like I, I mean, I know a ton of seekers who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and joined Community of Christ and these are, these are people who are fully into Community of Christ and have left their previous faith. But there is still that tiny little bit of fear about the afterlife. What if I have given up my place in heaven for outer darkness because I have turned my back on the truth? And, and there is very real fear in, in that. And I understand that fear as well. I mean, what, the what ifs could send you backwards, it sounds like, in this kind of a place. And I've, I actually was listening in on a class and, um, this woman, she had begun a faith transition and she actually raised her hand in class and she said, I just wish I didn't know what I now know. I wish I could go back to that first naivete. I was happy then. And now I know too much. And

the teacher said, Would you really want to go back? And she said, The way I feel now, yeah, I would want to go back. I haven't heard a lot of people say that. But for her the pain was so deep. It was hard.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:52

And, you know, there's, there's family members, you know? My family who went through that questioning time like in their 30s and, um, and, and reacted neg, negatively to where they had been and they wanted to go to a church that would tell them all the right answers, you know? This, that had been destroyed for them in this denomination. They couldn't, they, they knew the questions, they couldn't unlearn the questions, and questions about our history and things like that. And, so, what they very intentionally looked for was a place that would tell them, If you do this, this and this, if you think this, this and this, you'll be okay with God, um, into eternity. And, and that, it's just part of our human need is for security. And depending on what's happening in our lives, that, that going back to an absolute security is not, it's not unusual and needs to be not judged.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:01

In, in that case, it's like swapping out first naivetes, right? I had (One for another.) this, I had this first naive and I, Christianity has to be a first naive, so I need, just need to find other form that I agree with. That's not seeing the process through actually. But, yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:17

Yeah. So, um, you know, there's some of the problems that we face in this, in the critical moment, especially in this movement part of it, is that, How do I feel about those who are now where I used to be? You know? How do I feel about them? How will I treat them? You know, what's happening in, in my head and my heart with them? And then problem of how to think about those who instant, intentionally stayed where you were even though they knew some of the same questions and had some of the same struggles that you had. And, you know, these are parts of, of this critical moment of determining can, can I, will I go on even though it means, um, sometimes loneliness or isolation? Um, and how will I think about, feel, react to those who may have had the same information, but haven't, haven't moved from that place? So, the judging or minimizing, um, the fear of what those people will think, um, or the things that, that they think will get you again, you know? That's part of that struggle with humility in this new place where you're standing, um, in the temptation to feel superior. So, there's, there's all of these things that, that are just, they're going to be there. And it's okay to acknowledge that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:06

And I think one, one more thing to add here in this critical moment, uh, section is that we've seen this many times where someone gets to this point. And what they decide to do is stick around and snipe, right? In other words, in other words, they're, they're, they're going to be the, they're going to be the, the watch guards of the critical moment. They're going to make sure that nobody can ever believe or claim anything again. And so they're going to, they're going to always then be critical of any religious claims though they, though they stay in the community.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:40

Yeah. One of the ways to think about it is that this place of questioning, um, is power, you know? It's the, there's, there's some tangible power in the questions. And, and you can stump people, and you

can stop people, and you can, uh. And so there's, there are some people who like this spot, the critical moment, because it gives them a little place to disturb other people. And to say, I can't move on, and I'm not letting anybody else (Yes.) move on either.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:09

And, and the thing is, they've not seen the process fully through. And that, this is, that, that then basically becomes a form of sort of theological arrested development which is like, All I got now is critical questions and that's all I'm going to give you. And it's like, You, there's, there's, there's territory you haven't gotten to yet. So, that can be really, that can be as difficult in congregational life as the, the conflict between people in critical moments and first naivete can. Um, so, yeah

Carla Long 51:39

Theological arrested development sounds like a really great TV show as well. Theological arrested development. I mean, I loved Arrested Development, but this is like the sequel to it. I feel like I should have mentioned this at an earlier one, but I do want to say this. Um, when people are converting to Community of Christ, like in my congregation, or so on, and so forth, I always make sure to tell them--always--and, again, I think I'm saying this a little bit too late, that I make sure and say that Community of Christ will disappoint them at some point, you know, like when they walk in, and I think we're perfect. And we have, and, and I hear it all the time. They're like, You guys are everything I've always wanted you to be. I'm like, we are not perfect, we are not even close to perfect, we will disappoint you. And there will come a moment when you will think, Can I really be a part of this organization anymore? I promise you, there'll be a moment that comes and I hope you decide that you can. But there will be that moment. And that's super important for people to realize that they're, they're not walking into something that is going to be the end all, be all and everything they want it to be. No, and this is the perfect moment to say that, um, because yes, you know, that's one of the necessary steps to moving beyond the critical moment is to recognize that there isn't a perfect system.

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:55

Right. Yeah. That, that's exactly where I was going to go to.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:58

And then it's not about being part of a perfect system. It's, it's about something else.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:04

A, a characteristic of Ricoeur's second naivete is that you become, you, you (This is where we're going right now.) Where we're going now. Yeah, so, so you become a both and thinker, right? And you, you are comfortable both with commitment to, say, Christ, and the reality that I'm doing this in an institution that is frail and human. And I can do both things at once.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:32

Or I can be committed to Christ and still have questions about Jesus' historical (Sure.) time and place and who he was.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:43

So second, second naivete or tested naivete is where the process will, will go if, you know, if you, if you follow it through. But one has to be careful because whenever you set things up in stages--you know, step one, step two, step three--lots of people say, Oh, yeah, I've been through step one and two. I'm so happy to be in step three. And so, (I've arrived.) I've arrived at step three and so I'm good. Second, second naivete is itself kind of also a journey. It's the start of a new journey, but what it, what it, what, what characterizes it, is that you've come to a new level of peace and commitment to whatever you've now defined is the central features of, in this case, Christian faith, right? And, so, you're, you're more comfortable with ambiguity, but also comfortable with the fact that there's stuff here that really claims me and I'm going to hold on to that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:35

And there's still in this, in this step of the second naivete, um, this necessity of letting go of things and of picking up things. So, we're, we don't now have our basket full and, and we just, we're now, we haven't just arrived. So, I think that's a really important element of the second naivete.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:57

Um, in the second naivete, you're, you become comfortable with such things as, uh, Isaiah didn't write all of the book of Isaiah. And the four gospels are all anonymously written and two of them use one of the others as a source.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:13

And they all may describe Jesus differently. (Right.) Well, they obviously do, but you know that it's okay that they do.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:20

Yeah. And so you, you become, you, you, you become open to the struggle and ambiguity of religion while at the same time recognizing that there's something of infinite value present in this and you're, and you're, you're going to, you're going to reach out and try to claim that as much as you can. So, both, both things are happening at once then.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:40

And one of the things, I'm going to read a little quote here in a minute, but is that we come to grips with our lack of knowing, and the bigness of God, and that we can't control with our minds or beliefs, who God is. So, that, there's that making room. And this is a quote from Christine Valters Paintner out of this book called Lectio Divina--The Sacred Art. She's talking about a particular kind of prayer, um, but it really helps with this understanding of the second naivete where it's, the focus is more on God than it is on us. And the deconstructing and being open to the unknowing which kind of opens us up to, more to who God is, um, in a much bigger sense. But she says, Intellectually we may understand that God is far beyond any image we can create. But to experience in the depth of our being, the great unknowing of God can be a truly terrifying experience. The apophatic way, the unknowing way, the way of unknowing, is the slow work of deconstructing our most beloved ideals and idols leading us into a naked experience of the real. And then she goes on, uh, to talk about her own experience, When my mother died, I was bereft. And all the ways I had imagined God's presence in my life suddenly felt void

of meaning or truth. I entered a long period of darkness, which I later came to understand as a journey into unknowing. The theology that has sustained me for many years could not withstand this kind of loss and heartbreak. But before I could mature into a new way of encountering God, I had to be stripped of the old.

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:47

I think that's beautiful. I, I, I just, I love the idea that, you know, first naivete works well for many people, sometimes for all their lives. But there are theologies within first level naivete that may not be up to the things that happen to people in life, right? And, um, when, when you hear the, the, the, the old saw that, um, you know, war, warfare sometimes turns people into atheists, I understand that. And sometimes it turns into atheists because their first level understanding of God or faith or life was not able to, to make a transition to the brutality of warfare, right? And, so, um, it's really important for, for Community of Christ to help people create theological frameworks that can, that can, are flexible and can withstand the, sometimes the, the punishment that life just brings, right, the struggles. (And that can sustain a relationship with God, in the realness and messiness of life.) In, in the second naivete, God, Christ, Spirit, church, these things all become real to you again, but in a whole new way, a whole new level, and have a whole new set of meanings. Um, it's, it's this, this, I'll mention this is an ongoing process, too, because you, you never just, you never just automatically quickly shake everything you picked up in first not, first level naivete. It's, it's, it's, there's, it, there's an ongoing, uh, shifting sorting process. But second level naivete is, it, it's really characterized by a new commitment to the values, the deepest, the essential ideals of, of, in this case, Christian faith. Um, so, there can be a new level of comfort in it, but you're also, you also become more comfortable with the non-comfort, right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:56

It's a discomfort that other people believe very different things and you can see it not now as an enemy, but as a, as a friend that broadens your view. (Go ahead.)

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:06

I was just gonna say in second naivete, you, you, you're doing the work of separating the essentials from the peripherals. And you, you may not necessarily be just simply throwing the peripherals out, but you may be able to identify them better as peripherals and say, This is, this is less important than this, right? This, this belief or practice is less important than this. Go ahead, Carla. Sorry.

Carla Long 1:00:32

Oh, no. You're fine. All of this is making me think that, you know, even within a one church organization, maybe we're speaking different languages, you know? Like, I mean, what, there are times when I wonder if people are understanding what I'm saying or I'm actually understanding what they're saying. And I, it might have something to do with this, um, and being, and I'm not saying being on a different level like it's a bad thing or anything like that. But maybe since my, I feel like in a lot of ways, I've deconstructed and reconstructed because of classes that I took from you and because of seminary and so on and so forth. The people who haven't done that work, maybe it's a different communication process. I, I mean, this is the first time I really thought about it like that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:16

That is really well said. That makes me think about how, um, people who are in the first naivete when they, I'm thinking of within Community of Christ will ask, uh, questions about why isn't our church curriculum for children emphasizing this and this and this, you know? And it, and they are the, the basics of their, their belief that they received. And they can sometimes be very upset because that's what passing on the faith means is teaching our kids these very same things that they learned. And, so, they're, they're speaking a, a language, and they have very real concern, and they need, and they need to be heard. But they're not going to be satisfied because one of the other things that the church is trying to do is to help youth and children to introduce them to this, this more nuanced understanding of what God, how God works and who Jesus is and what following Jesus looks like. And it's not going to be just reiterating those things that make a complete faith, so, in the eyes of somebody else, um, so, yeah, we're often speaking different languages depending on where we are, um, in, in these steps.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:02:45

Uh, it, it dawned on me that, you know, if you, wishing that we had a church made up of all second naivete people is itself a remnant of first, first level naivete thinking, right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:02:59

Let's get us all in one place where we can all agree and be right.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:02

So, that, that would not actually, that's not actually even imaginable because, because faith itself is a formative journey for people and people are always going to be at different stages and steps and, and doing backups and head forwards. And, and, so, there's no, we, we, can't just, we can't just turn this into a formula.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:03:21

And we need it all. We need to be forming children into the basics of who is God and, but we also need to have some open doors there for, for when they come to the questioning because different ones come to the questioning at different times. And if they feel like there's no room for questioning, they'll leave as well. And, um, but the people in the, in the critical moment, there's energy there. There's focusing on the right questions, sometimes the wrong questions, too. But they're focusing on the right questions that, if the church as a whole is listening, un, can help to generate where what is it we sense God's calling to us to in this moment and in the following moment. And so we need each other. We need people who are in all of those stages, um, in order to be open and responsive to what the Spirit may be doing.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:20

And having people in all those stages is the, the essential for practicing love. (Yeah. Yeah.) And it's interesting to me that if you want, if you want to see what, uh, critical naivete or, or, or second naivete looks like in the Bible, go read I Corinthians 13. Paul's famous love chapter where Paul, the apostle who encountered the risen Christ in person, whatever that was, had a revelation of the risen Christ, who was exceptionally gifted, also not a very good speaker, but exceptionally gifted, who missionized the whole eastern end of the Roman Empire, says, We know in part. We see in part. Um, when the

fullness comes, then we will know as we are known. But, in other words, the fullness isn't here. That's, that's an example of, of critical naivete. (No, no. That's second.) Or second, second naivete, to realize that what, we, we see something and we can put some words on it, but it's not the full thing. And in the meantime, we get to practice love towards everybody else, right? I think that's where you can find it in, in Scripture.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:34

Practicing love is not going to hurt anybody in any of those, in any of those stages.

Carla Long 1:05:39

Amen. And

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:41

It will help them all, help us all.

Carla Long 1:05:43

I hate the fact that love has to be patient. That is so annoying, but it's so true.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:49

That long suffering. And the, yeah, acceptance and forgiveness. Oh, my goodness. Yeah.

Carla Long 1:05:57

Why can't love just be easy and feed me brownies all the time. That's what I would like love to be. So, this has been very helpful for me. I've really appreciated this. We should probably draw this podcast to a close. But is there something else that we need to talk about that we didn't get a chance to talk about?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:06:12

Um, you know, um, first naivete type people, I mentioned before, tend to see people in the critical moment as a danger. And I can say, critical people in the critical moment tend to see people in second naivete as having reverted to fundamentalism, which is simply not true.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:06:33

People sometimes in the critical moment will confuse people who are in the first naivete and the second (Yeah.) naivete. (Yeah.) Uh, they don't, because they may be saying some of the same things.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:06:43

Very quick example, uh, that I like to use with students to help them understand this process. Santa Claus, right? Crit, uh, first level naivete. There's a dude in a red circ, suit coming down the chimney giving presence. Critical moment. Oh, my Lord. Mom and or dad are the ones giving the presents. Santa is a lie. Second naivete, you discover, Ah, the figure of St. Nicholas was actually named after a historical bishop, St. Nicholas of Myra, fourth century Christian bishop. And what little we know about his story is that he raised money and gave money to poor families to provide dowries for their daughters, so their daughters wouldn't be sold off as slaves. Ah, that's a Santa Claus I can get behind.

And so when I see, when I see pictures of Santa Claus at, at Christmas time, second naivete says, That's a symbol of generosity and social justice. That's a, that's a thumbnail sketch of the whole process.

Carla Long 1:07:47

That's beautiful. And also second naivete, after you realize Santa doesn't exist, you can be like, Huh, if I pretend Santa does exist, I might get more presents. So, I'm gonna keep pretending.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:59

I think that's still a critical moment. (Oh, okay. Okay.) A critical moment time where you can say, Hmm, this could work for me. Critical moment fits into that, too, you know, the kid who finds out and then has to tell everybody, all of his, his younger brothers or sisters and

Carla Long 1:08:21

Make sure they have critical moments as well.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:08:24

Well, let's share that. Yeah.

Carla Long 1:08:26

That's a great example. Actually, a very nice quick, um, shall I say, tying the bow on the gift of this podcast. So, thank you so much for all of this. This has been really good. And I think this is super important for people to hear that, you know, first of all, they're not alone. That lots of people go through this. There's even stages in it. Um, it can help you kind of like just, um, intellectualize where you're at, in this very emotional process. And maybe just put it kind of in a place where you can say, Okay, this is where I am. It's okay that I'm here. And I, this is how I can get out of it or I can stay here for a while or whatever. So, thank you so much. It's been really helpful.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:09:07

And I think just the, the remember, to remember, God is with you in each of these stages. Thank God, you can recognize God with you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:09:18

Yeah. (Amen.) The, the I am with you always means always.

Carla Long 1:09:23

Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Tony. Thank you so much, Charmaine. I really appreciate it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:09:28

Glad to be with you.

Josh Mangelson 1:09:37

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