

# Reverend Richard Coles, Justice Disrupted interview

## **SPEAKERS**

Byron Vincent, Rev. Richard Coles

### **Introduction 00:00**

Welcome to Justice Disrupted. This week I speak to the wise and sagacious Reverend Richard Coles with a special guest star appearance from one of his dogs; absolute tarts for the spotlight those little sausage dogs. For much of my life, whenever I've encountered a religious person, my instinct would be to be challenging and combative, rather than seek humanity and connection, which as I get older, I'm aware is my problem. And a widely shared one at that. But as the years pass, and the world becomes more partisan, I know from understanding that there's a lot to be said for shutting up and listening, and learning, which I really hope I do in this interaction. But before we get going, I have to say, we advise listener discretion for Justice Disrupted. This podcast will broach social justice, and it will touch on many areas, including but not exclusive to crime, trauma, and abuse. And some listeners may find that distressing to listen to. In this episode specific topics include alcohol addiction and grief. And if you are affected by anything in this podcast, there are a list of links on the Community Justice Scotland website that could offer support and guidance. Thanks bundles for tuning in. If you find the conversation interesting, then please share, comment and like in this overly saturated podcast mass. That's enough for me waffling. Shall we get started?

### **Byron Vincent 01:59**

I'm a bit sick so I've got my COVID lateral flow test, which I'm going to do directly after this. So if I'm not firing on all cylinders, I sincerely apologise.

### **Rev. Richard Coles 02:08**

No worries, so you're not feeling well?

### **Byron Vincent 02:10**

Not feeling great today.

### **Rev. Richard Coles 02:11**

Oh dear. I don't know where you are, Byron, but there's this awful COVID-like cold going on, that's not COVID.

### **Byron Vincent 02:17**

Yeah, fingers crossed. But I was hoping we could do this in person, but it's a good job we didn't because, you know, I might be responsible for the demise of Britain's most loved vicar.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 02:28

Well, there's a queue of people who'd like that credit, let me tell you. But, em. Well, let's hope you're... I'm sorry to hear you're poorly.

**Byron Vincent** 02:35

I've been listening to your beautifully written books this week. You refer to yourself as a delinquent in one of them. What kind of shenanigans did a young Richard Coles get up to?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 02:44

So I was a good little boy really, rather indulged, I think, by the adults around me. And then I kind of went away to school. And then when puberty arrived, it all sort of changed, and I realised that I didn't particularly want to fit into the mould that I hadn't even noticed I was being fitted into. So I became a sort of public school Bolshevik, with all the limited potency that that suggests. But it did mean [sic] that I found myself at odds with my world. And I've almost stayed there in a way really, I've always felt... I suppose the delinquency came in with a refusal to cleave to the expectations of those around me at that time.

**Byron Vincent** 03:22

I was a good boy too really. I was a good boy in an environment that wanted me to be bad, I think. And it strikes me from reading your memoir that you were maybe looking for excitement in an environment that was very strict and rigid, and maybe that you didn't necessarily want to conform to, is that a fair assessment?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 03:42

I think it's just, I don't know what happened, actually. I mean, I think, I think it's realising you're gay, in a straight world, when that's something that is potentially very disruptive of status quo and stuff, that must have been it. But I think it happened before then really. I wanted to be at an angle to things, I think I wanted to stand a bit outside things because I was curious, because also, I grew up in Kettering. And for those who don't know Kettering, it's Britain's equivalent of the most nondescript town in the flyover state, if you see what I mean. And I just had a sense that there was a richer life to be lived beyond the horizon. And I was always a bit fascinated by that. And I got reports of it from music and literature and painting and stuff that I was interested in. And occasionally an exotic would pop up in my life, who'd lived in that richer environment. And I thought, oh, I want some of that, please. I went to Stratford on Avon, which was an unusual way of acquiring it but that was a sort of dogleg on my way to London, which is where things really happen.

**Byron Vincent** 04:39

Where do you think that precociousness came from? Was it encouraged?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 04:43

That's a really good question. I don't know, is the short answer. I had very... it sounds sort of boastful, it's not really meant to be. But I did have an unusual aptitude for reading very early, and for language and for music. I remember when I was very, very small, I was about three or four, hearing music and it

would make me either laugh or cry, it would have this very powerful emotional effect on me. Then I think I was probably rather encouraged by my mum, who I think saw in me something that she, had a bit of potential or something. And then at school, I was very lucky because my parents were relatively wealthy; I had a paid for education, which meant that aptitude would be sort of noticed and picked up and encouraged a bit. The downside... and also I was a chorister, so from the age of eight, I was a chorister. So I was singing music to a professional standard while I was literally in short trousers. I think the downside to that is, I'm not sure developmentally, it's always very good for you to have gifts and aptitudes; so kind of determinedly focused at that sort of age, because I think it made me a bit weird.

**Byron Vincent** 05:54

That's incredibly relatable. I was a very precocious kid as well, the difference being that I was stuck on a council estate in Preston. And there isn't really the space for the kind of weird that I was, there. Did you feel that, although your gifts and preferences may have been anomalous in the environment, do you think that they were welcome?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 06:15

Some were. I think some liked the idea of having some kind of exotic child. I was really pretentious, well was. So I was a bit fascinated by Sir Roy Strong, the youngest ever Director of the National Portrait Gallery, an exotic creature in a big moustache and a fedora, he kind of floated in there for the [southern pay] cover supplements. And so I made my dad buy me a fedora when I was 10. And I wore it to the Albert Hall. And I remember a man saying, look at that peculiar little boy, which was not quite the effect I wished it to have. So I always say I must have looked pretty peculiar, I think. But I was having a whale of a time prancing around, showing off. If I'd grown up in Preston, I don't know, I mean, fortunately, there are places in Preston: the gallery, the bus station, that, again, would tell you of a world in which perhaps a non-anomalous people might find a place, I don't know. I'm a big fan of Preston actually.

**Byron Vincent** 07:10

I had some tough times there, so I've got mixed feelings about it.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 07:13

Sure.

**Byron Vincent** 07:13

But like, I grew up on a sort of satellite estate and the little microcosms that evolve away from the rest of society, you know, and I was, I was, well. In fact, I used to wear a lot of my sister's hand me downs. I'd just wander around our estate, this post-industrial very hyper masculine working class estate in a purple fedora that used to be my sister's and, and it didn't fly. You know, it didn't go down too well.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 07:37

I'd love to think of you Byron, though, going to the gallery to look at that wonderful portrait of the woman in the yellow dress and thinking, maybe, maybe one day.

**Byron Vincent** 07:44

[Laughter]. I was quite proud of my differences growing up. I thought it was everybody else's problem, which was an issue as well. Did you have that sort of fight in you? It sounds like you did.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 07:54

I think I did, yeah. I can remember seeing Lindsay Anderson's film, 'if', which anyone who went to an English public school would have loved that film, because it showed the boys at that school actually assassinating their teachers with machine guns that they'd liberated from the CCF armoury. So, yeah, I think there was a part of me that was revolutionary actually. Tell me where that came from, because I was in so many ways... I was a very timid child as well. I mean, I wasn't brave or bold. And also I wasn't, I was swotty and specky and awkward and physically shy, and diffident. But there was this, nevertheless, a sort of fire that burnt in me, which was one that sort of wanted to remake the world, I think, and was outraged by hypocrisy and injustice, and all those things, even though I was a beneficiary of, I was a privileged and entitled person, I think, you know, weird mixture.

**Byron Vincent** 08:55

Were you aware of your privilege as a younger person? Is it possible to be?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 08:59

Not really, I think it was only when I threw in my lot with people who hadn't shared them that I... and I was a bit older when I came to London really, and began to understand that not everybody woke up in the mornings thinking, Where is the rising arc of my life going to take me today? My big revelation was Jimmy Somerville, who he grew up in a very tough working class sectarian background in a tenement in Glasgow, and he didn't have expectations that his life was going to be an adventure of increasing delight and reward, you know, and that was a real eye-opener, that I kind of knew about it in theory, and I was the Guardian reading boy in a Telegraph reading school. It was a bit theoretical, until I understood a bit better what people's lives were like who weren't like me.

**Byron Vincent** 09:43

Were you always destined to become a man of the cloth? Were you always destined to become the man you are now or has it been a shock to you?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 09:49

Well I wouldn't have thought so. But my nephew Olly, who's now is just starting university, he's 18. A couple of years ago, he was just sort of becoming aware that the adults in his life had a backstory. And he asked me if I'd been in a band and I went, yeah. And he said, what, like, a real band? I said, yeah. And he, he said, Were you on YouTube? And I thought, well we didn't have YouTube then Olly, but I think I'm on now. And so he looked, he looked up, looked us up on video. And then at the end of it, he said, You know, it's really funny. Even then you can see there's a vicar struggling to get out. [laughter] So I think, I mean, I was a chorister when I was a kid. So I kind of grew up in a world of the Church of England, in its most traditional guise. And although I was, I started the atheist club in our choir, we spoke poltergeist during the sermon and got into all kinds of trouble. I did love it, too. I loved the music. I liked the architecture, but also, I think I sensed something, which was that there are things you can take to holy places that don't go in other places. And when later in life, when that began to make a bit more sense to me, I kind of knew where to go.

**Byron Vincent** 10:50

I'm a joyless atheist, so forgive my ignorance on certain things. Like, one of the things that appeals to me about religion, and maybe this is misguided, it looks like it gives you an opportunity to quite comfortably organise your world.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 11:05

Yeah

**Byron Vincent** 11:06

Being a man of the cloth, is the concept of justice something straightforward to you?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 11:12

Well, the concept of justice is straightforward. How you apply it, work it, uphold it, is very, very complicated. I think, I think religion, actually with Christianity, I don't mean about other religions, but Christianity or the version of it that I try to do. While it does inevitably bring comfort and consolation, much more than that it brings challenge, actually. And the challenge is how do we uphold what we're called to uphold when we are imperfect creatures who try to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, who takes you beyond anything you'd imagined? On all sorts of adventures and misadventures, and you end up at the foot of the cross looking up and thinking, well is this really, is this really what it was all about? And then what opens up after that is where it really gets interesting, but it's very, very difficult. And the longer I do it, the more difficult it gets. But I must let the dog in, it'll stop barking, do you mind, I won't be one second. Sorry about that.

**Byron Vincent** 12:09

In terms of the Bible's teachings, when we're talking about good and evil. Does the Bible talk in terms of good and bad people? Or is there room to talk about people in terms of the context of their lives and certain provocations and influences?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 12:25

Well, there's absolutely no negotiation between good and evil in my view, but everything else is provisional where human beings come into it. The Bible does not give you a sort of highway code on how to live your life. Some people say it does. The Bible is a collection of writings assembled over many centuries by all sorts of people, all trying to do the same thing, which is try to understand what God is and what God does expect of us and how God impacts our lives. And there's a huge range of experiences about that. So to try to distil from that a one way of doing it is a fool's errand, I think. And also, you know, we are self seeking, and easily deluded and kind of wandering, and sometimes idle, and sometimes, kind of nonchalant people. And whenever we try to engage with a mystery of God, it behoves us always to remember that it is a mystery, and that there is no definitive version of that in human experience. So there's always room, always room about that, I think. And one of the absolutely fundamental elements and that justice to which we're called is that we judge appropriately, and that is knowing that we are bad judges ourselves, and that if we're going to judge whether we better do that with a degree of latitude, mercy, and generosity, that we would want to be judged ourselves, I suppose.

**Byron Vincent** 13:55

Yeah, I guess on that note, in terms of crime and punishment, should the latter always follow the former?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 14:02

It's an interesting one. Whenever people say God's mercy is limitless, which is true, but then so is God's judgement. And I sometimes think that mercy feels like judgement. Because if we could really see ourselves as God sees us to be perfectly seen and perfectly loved, then that might feel like something excoriating in fact, and if we could do that, we might really transform, be transformed and transform other's lives, but it would feel I think, not like a walk in the park. It's never a walk in the park.

**Byron Vincent** 14:33

Yeah, I think the children that are properly loved and properly nurtured, tend to grow up to be adults that know how to love and nurture and to be kind and don't generally have tendencies to hurt other people. I wonder if that's what we're doing when we're seeking a higher power or God or attaching ourselves to religion. Are we looking, are we... do you think there's an element of looking for love that we don't get elsewhere?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 14:56

I think so. Maybe I mean, again, I don't want to generalise. People do it for all sorts of different reasons. But I think there is a sense of completeness that it offers. But that's an interesting one. Because completeness, I don't think it means that you kind of trot around serenely. I think Jesus says, I come to bring you life in its fullness. He doesn't say I come to make you happy, He says I come to bring you life in its fullness. And I think that's a capacity to live life in all its rage and to, to allow yourself to be open and vulnerable, and capable of change and transformation. And sometimes that means, and also, I think admitting your own awfulness. One of the big lessons for me in maturity has been... there's a very dangerous temptation for Christians, especially, you know, kind of representative Christians, is that we dress ourselves too readily in the garments of salvation. And actually, it often makes us more part of the problem than the solution, I think, sometimes.

**Byron Vincent** 15:53

Yeah, I think the types of punishments we tend to favour culturally, are antithetical to rehabilitation...

**Rev. Richard Coles** 16:01

Oh yeah.

**Byron Vincent** 16:02

...or redemption, if you want to call it that, you know, and so a lot of the time when we are punishing people, we're just creating greater problems. Is there a way of moving away from the hyperbolic fire and brimstone judgement of the criminal justice system, to a kinder, more practical way of dealing with people who are troubled?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 16:23

I really hope so. But there are two very difficult things in there to overcome. One is a matter of resources. And anyone who's got any involvement in the criminal justice system in particular, will know that, so much of what we try to do is limited by the unavailability of resources to make that happen, so that's one thing. The really important thing, though, it's very much easier to punish people with whom you feel you have no fellow experience, if I can put it that way. And I think the really important thing, I mean, when people with an abundance of the fruits of the creation, judge those who have bugger all, they tend to do so with a lack of generosity and understanding. And I sometimes think, I would make it a precondition of anyone in political office to know what it's like to be poor. I think if you can just know what it's like, if you can walk a couple of miles in the shoes of somebody else, that it might make you a little bit more generous and a bit more thoughtful, in how you handle them, if lives gets messy and unpredictable, and difficult.

**Byron Vincent 17:22**

I think the argument of resources not being available is often a false argument as well, because now with the studies done around things like Adverse Childhood Experiences, which sort of measure the relationship between formative trauma and behaviour in later life, we know that if we spent the money in certain areas, we could vastly reduce crime in adulthood, you know, treating crime, and often addiction, things like that as public health issue rather than a criminal justice issue really helps. If we impact on certain people's behaviours in a positive way, in a nurturing way, showing people skills rather than putting them in an environment where they're going to continue to behave in the way that they've always known. We're not just impacting on that person's life, we're impacting on their future generations, we're impacting on their children, their partners. Prison's very, very expensive, and often programmes that are a bit more compassionate, like the VRU where people have mentors and are coached, maybe for the first time actually into a life that's less chaotic, and more productive, and taught how to look after their kids and taught how to look after themselves and love both of those. Those things are often much, much cheaper. And so the argument that it's a financial thing is often a fallacy.

**Rev. Richard Coles 18:32**

I think, yeah I agree with you, and I think my observation is, I spend a bit of time in prisons, and it's the numbers of people who are in prison who needn't, shouldn't be in prison, and the prison has become a sort of remedy of last resort. Except it's not a remedy of course, you just need a bit of investment, as you say, in creating communities, I think in which people can perhaps sustain less damage and acquire the kind of the rudiments of human dignity a bit more readily. That would be the way to do it. But you know, that's an easy thing to say, it's a very difficult thing to do.

**Byron Vincent 19:06**

I saw a discussion that you had with Derren Brown, where the idea of suffering is in some way edifying or transformative was discussed. I think that poor people understand that suffering, especially trauma, it often takes away more than it gives. And prisons and rehabs and psych wards are full of people that carry the burden of the suffering. What are your thoughts on that?

**Rev. Richard Coles 19:27**

I think suffering is going to come your way. It'll come your way in spades if you're less fortunate, and perhaps come your way in teaspoons if you are fortunate. I think it's part of the fullness of human

experience. And I think, often through suffering, the possibilities for transformation beyond the horizon that we see can open up. I would say that, I'm a Christian. I think there's absolutely no merit in suffering just as a sort of life discipline though, I've seen too much of the damage it does to people to be unpersuaded. If anyone tries too easily to claim aim for it some kind of redemptive quality. I would like to do everything possible to diminish and reduce, and reduce to the point of zero, the suffering that people experience really. As you say, you know, suffering as a sort of, one sort of colour in the paint box of your life experience, is very different from the kind of grim reality that so many people experience because their lives are distorted and damaged and hurt as a consequence of suffering that's inflicted upon them.

**Byron Vincent** 20:32

So your work as a vicar is taking you into prisons then?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 20:36

Yeah, I mean, I do. I did a bit of prison chaplaincy in my first parish and I'm retiring next year and I'm going to do a bit more prison ministry then as a volunteer. Because you know, partly because it means I don't have to go to deanery synod, hurrah. Partly it means I don't have to chair a meeting ever again, hurrah. But also because I think it's very obvious if you spend any time in the prison system, you'll get a sense really of, of how people's lives are distorted as a consequence of misfortune and lack of opportunity, lack of... the amount of people who have severe mental health problems, and other people who struggle with literacy. So in a way for someone who's looking at how the world might better conform to what it could be, prisons are good places to see where that work might lie, I think.

**Byron Vincent** 21:23

Often, there's just not enough room for redemption. There's just not enough room for people to rehabilitate, and it's all focused on the punitive. When you go into work in prisons, what do you offer in terms of an opportunity for turning people's lives around?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 21:37

Gosh, that's such a huge ambition. I think, really, it's what I, what I want to do is to hear people really, talk to people, especially people who are A) not used to being heard, and B) might not be easy to understand. It's an odd privilege you get with a dog collar is that you do somehow still even, there must be some kind of social, sociological code or something, but people will talk to you. And if you're going to talk to me walking around the street, the people who will stop and talk to you are public school boys and girls, former service personnel and prisoners, because I think they're used to having chaplains around. And in, you know, prisons as you know, where it's, you can sometimes be vulnerable, if you speak freely, to have someone you can speak to freely is often quite a productive thing, I think. And also just to participate in regimes where people are thinking carefully and responsibly, about how you could maybe do something, get through to people, maybe do things in a prison regime that would assist a future life and keep them out of prison if possible.

**Byron Vincent** 22:46

I think as well, people don't understand the power of having their narrative altered by an external voice of authority. You know, if you've been told your entire life, that you are useless, having somebody



deviate from that narrative, it's a little ray of light to walk towards, and imagine a better and less chaotic existence.

**Rev. Richard Coles 23:13**

That's a very interesting one, in my first parish, it was a big lesson for me was, I was, this is in Boston in Lincolnshire, which is in The Land That Time Forgot, east of the A1. And a pretty town if you look at it, lovely. But actually social problems there is intensely entrenched, I don't think I've encountered anywhere else, actually, without the effects of a big city to maybe ameliorate them. I remember going to do a funeral and it was a woman who'd died and I went to, and it was in the toughest street in town and the house was really tatty. And the door was answered by, I think it was her son. And it was dark and it was dingy and the place was filthy and a mess. And I remember, please, thinking, please don't offer me a cup of tea. I didn't get offered the cup of tea. And he wasn't very forthcoming, didn't tell me very much about her, I just remember there was a picture of Michael Owen in a Liverpool strip on the wall, but it was yellowed with nicotine. And I just did a fairly perfunctory job, I thought, you know, straightforward crem [crematorium] funeral, blah blah blah. And when I turned up at the crem, there were about 250 people there. And I thought they were there for somebody else. And they weren't, they were there for this woman. And I remember at the end, there was a guy who stood out a bit, partly because he was mixed race in a very white place. But also he was in the uniform of a British Army officer. So I got talking to him, and it turned out that this woman had been the one person on that estate, which was as rough as any I've ever known, who was the kind of dispenser of love and care for people. There were lots of kids who were running around who came from very unstable backgrounds, didn't have much structure and love in their lives. And she, who was not a sentimental person, was just somebody who was steady, loving, cared for them, gave what she had out of her very limited resources. And I remember him saying, she just made it possible for me to imagine a future that could be better.

**Byron Vincent 25:08**

The benefits of having a positive role model, especially a role model that understands your environment and has some kind of gravitas in that environment, in some kind of position in that environment. That's the most valuable resource you can have in that kind of space, you know.

**Rev. Richard Coles 25:23**

But I do think there's something about, just to disrupt that narrative of, I think, a little while ago, of an eight year old boy who was taken into care, because we found out that from the age of five, he had been, he'd slept in a wheelie bin, because the adults in his, in his household said that he was rubbish. And so for three years, from the age of five to eight, he literally slept in a wheelie bin and you just think, what damage has that done for this boy? What chances would he have of putting that behind him as he becomes an adult? And, you know, those are stories that you encounter all the time when you talk to people who end up in the criminal justice system.

**Byron Vincent 26:02**

Have you noticed a shift culturally, recently, especially since the dawn of social media, I guess, and especially in certain spaces in social media, like Twitter, the growth of cancel culture, and that kind of thing, where we're very, very quick to judge somebody. I understand the impulse but what I really

genuinely worry about is that if we get to a point where we're moving away from the idea that people are redeemable, then what are we moving towards?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 26:25

Yeah.

**Byron Vincent** 26:26

Where's the hope then, where's the room for improvement? What, how do we make society better if all we're gonna do is ostracise people because if all we are is punished, that doesn't make people better people?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 26:36

Yeah, I think two things have happened. Broad brushstrokes here Byron, but I think one of them is that Twitter is like road rage, you just bump into people and you can scream and shout and everything. And you never really catch their eye and see that there is a person there like you on the end of the abuse you're giving and receiving. So that's one thing. The other thing is when society is particularly turbulent with unresolved tensions, with anxieties, that needs earthing in some ways, and there's no way of doing it more effectively than finding a scapegoat. So we scapegoat people, for some people, that's immigrants, okay. And you load onto the immigrant, this kind of nasty foreign threatening Other, all your anxieties, and then you kind of send them out into the wilderness and then take it with you. And then you can kind of get on with your day, I guess. Other people do it with all kinds of people. I think also people who would tick the box 'smart progressive' as describing themselves do it too. It's a danger. If you're kind of on the progressive wing of things, you kind of think that what you think must be virtuous, because you're on the side of the angels. But actually, I think you see very often now that road rage and scapegoating is a fairly, it's two persistent phenomena, and you see them on all sides of the argument. A salutary lesson, I guess, of Christianity for me, is, if I am to share in God given dignity, then so is everybody else, including Priti Patel, which I struggle with, I have to say, and there are people in our world who pop up who I think are particularly active at the more competent end of our culture wars, who I do find it very difficult to love sometimes, but, but I have to, and if I can't, I have to know that I can't.

**Byron Vincent** 27:13

There's a lot of personal responsibility involved in this, obviously. But also I think the technology encourages that part as a binary thinking, how do we get over this kind of culture war divisiveness? What's the antidote?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 28:41

I think we have to be authentic. And I think we have to engage. And that means not monsterring people, 'othering' people to the point we don't really have to think about them anymore, or deal with them anymore. I think you have to kind of try to find ways of engagement. One of the things I kind of like to do on Twitter is, is to find strategies for avoiding lapsing into that kind of argy bargy, because it's boring and doesn't really go anywhere. So I think if you can find ways of modelling a more generous and a more thoughtful engagement with people, even in the... you know one thing I think is the problem with Twitter. I think it's evolved exponentially quickly, faster than we've been able to evolve a kind of

etiquette to deal with it, although I think we're getting better at it now. But it's also my belief and also experience that people, given half a chance, will try to sort of be nice to each other, it's like that bit on reality formats, when you can sense the producers are fuming because people are actually either getting on better than they'd hoped, or not responding to the many, many stimuli they're given to behave badly because actually, people do want to behave decently and understand each other and develop sympathetic relationships, I think so be on the side of that if you can.

**Byron Vincent** 29:54

I'm currently reading *The Madness Of Grief*, and it's an incredibly moving account. So, I've written a lot about my own traumas. And I know how indelicately they can be handled by people. I mean, I've had issues with mental health and things like that over the years. And I've put that into the public domain. I wrote a show about spending some time on a psych ward. I remember doing a series of radio interviews, and you know what it's like when you go in and do an interview. And there's somebody sat behind a monitor and the light goes on, and they sort of just pop their head round, and they fire a question at you and you're away. And this sort of breakfast radio type just popped his head around the monitor and went, Byron Vincent! How and why did you attempt to kill yourself? [laughter] First, you know what I mean? Like, there's, there's no, there's no foreplay whatsoever, it was just straight in there. And so I'm aware of how, like, your raw trauma gets passed into the public domain, and we make that choice ourselves.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 30:53

Yeah.

**Byron Vincent** 30:54

So I think it's an incredibly brave thing for you to do and incredibly moving, like I said. But for you, now that you've had to deal with that, and I'm sure been in a bunch of interviews with a bunch of people who've been indelicate, do you still think it was the right thing to do? For you personally, and for your mental well being?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 31:11

Well, it's a good question, Byron, thanks for a very thoughtful way of putting it too. Well, yeah, I mean, I, I knew when I was... I didn't know anything when I was writing it, I was just writing in the middle of the experience of having just lost my, my husband, my life, the love of my life, who died as a consequence of his alcohol addiction. It was a maelstrom. And I knew it was a maelstrom. And I knew that what I was writing then would reflect the extraordinary circumstances I was in at the time. I wanted to capture it, partly because I think I wanted to capture some of him before he went away completely, partly because I was really determined that David should be seen in the round really, and not as just an alcoholic. So when you die as a consequence of, of alcohol, I've had my own addictions myself and opened up about that from the inside. I've also been on the psychiatric ward as well, so I know what that's like, too. And I think it's just very important that you recover, really linked to what we were talking about earlier, that you don't allow people who evidence those experiences to kind of go into a siding where you don't really have to think about it too much, or care about it too much. Or think that could be me. I think anyone, if you've been close to someone or been through that yourself, will know that, that's something which all sorts of people can find themselves wrapped up in without, before they even know it, I think. I

also knew that, I've always had a policy of, if not full disclosure, fuller disclosure than some might think was good for me. But I think it's for the best actually, because, well, maybe I'm being premature. There have been moments when I've been, when I've wanted to write an appendix sometimes or a second edition, or to add stuff about David, partly because he didn't belong to me, in blogs, or anybody, but other people shared in his life. And when you write a book about someone, and that book gets or goes out into the world, and people read it, they're excluded from that conversation of necessity. And I sometimes think I'd quite like to bundle together an appendix of, of other people's impressions and memories of him, especially the stuff I found out from people after he died that... tell me and hint sometimes of a more... aspects of him that I didn't really know or hadn't really understood or seen. So all that stuff has to be kind of handled. But I would rather it were out there than not out there, I suppose.

**Byron Vincent** 31:11

Well thanks. You know, it... Like I say, it's great for the rest of us, but I'm aware of what a difficult process that must have been.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 33:39

The other thing is, he would have hated it.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 33:52

He would have really hated it. And I had to kind of work that one out. And also, obviously I spoke to his, his family and said, and they saw it before it was published and they were okay about that. But he would have hated it and I sometimes think about that. Of course he's not here anymore. Can't be hurt by it. But if, if I believed in ghosts I wouldn't be at all surprised if he came and tormented me in my declining years for that.

**Byron Vincent** 33:52

Yeah.

**Byron Vincent** 34:19

Was David from Chorley?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 34:21

He was actually from Manchester, well, Denton, so it's really where his hometown was. But his family now all live in Chorley and Leyland and that's why I know that part of the world so well. I am indeed a fan of Chorley Football Club. I have to be because his brother is their mascot, Victor the Magpie. In fact I'm coming up in a couple of weeks to talk to some school kids there and to visit the hospital, too.

**Byron Vincent** 34:44

So me, I'm 46 years old. I grew up on a council estate just up the road from Chorley, sort of between Chorley and Preston, little satellite estate. Everybody of my generation has struggled with addiction issues. And I wonder if it's something cultural about our age group. The culture that we grew up with had a very sort of, hedonism to the point of obliteration.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 35:04

That's interesting. I mean, I think, you know, the big industrialised cities of the Northwest, and indeed elsewhere, alcohol played a very important part as a palliative, I think, just getting people through the day. So I think that might be hard drinking cultures who've got historical backgrounds, it's just... In David's case, I don't think it was because he grew up in a, in a sort of slightly strange religious sect in which hard drinking or excess behaviour of any kind, apart from religious zeal, was frowned on. But it was also a culture in which, if you were gay, that would be seen as a ticket to hell. And I think that was really difficult for him. And his drinking really began when he came to London. And he was working as a nurse in A&E, a very traditionally drinky culture, and also going out at night on the gay scene, another very traditional drinky culture. And in the end, I think alcohol just became part of his daily experience.

**Byron Vincent 35:58**

I mean, is there like a high burnout rate with vicars, with clergypeople, who are living their own lives and dealing with their own stuff, and then, I'm sure, being frequently burdened by other people's as well?

**Rev. Richard Coles 36:09**

Actually not. The evidence shows that I think it's the number one job for job satisfaction, funnily enough, I mean, we all moan about it like hell, like every profession, but no, it's an immensely rewarding one. And the thing about the burden of other people is that you don't take it on yourself, you pass it up, if you see what I mean, and your job is not to share it, trespass on other people's grief and the integrity of their experience, your job is to hear it, and to pray for them, I think. Sometimes it does get to you actually, in surprising ways. But it's not ours.

**Byron Vincent 36:47**

You'll get an insight into people's lives that most people don't and a variety of lives as well. And so, for example, the relationship between something like addiction and trauma, were you connecting those dots years before the sciences were?

**Rev. Richard Coles 37:01**

Yes I think so. As one of the big eye-openers for me was when I was working with people who had served prison sentences from serious sexual offences, actually. And I just remember, again, it's, it's something that's trotted out very often, but I don't think people really give it its due weight. And that is the numbers of people who commit serious sexual offences who were the victims of serious sexual offences themselves, you just begin to see these repeating patterns in which people who, especially kids, and young people who don't have adult powers and skills, have forced upon them adult realities and experiences that they can't understand through sexual assault or violence, all kinds of things, and just seeing how that shapes and patterns a life thereafter, I think that's made me understand that much, much better. And that people, you do what you have to do sometimes, and you might make choices, which could seem baffling, be self destructive, to people on the outside of that experience with you on the inside of that experience, you might understand it a bit better.

**Byron Vincent 38:03**

Yeah, I think that it's easy to dismiss, if we exist in a bubble of privilege, most behaviour is a reaction to other behaviour. And if the behaviour that you're reacting to has been extremely negative, then your output is likely to be extremely negative as well.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 38:17

Yeah, I think also, we do love to have villains, we like to have the baddie in the black hat. We like to have fallen women. We like, there are all these kind of cultural stereotypes, and caricatures that allow us to feel a bit better about ourselves, a little bit insulated from the dangers and perils of existence. And I think you have to really be careful about that stuff and not, not fall into the mistake of thinking that you belong to the blameless ones.

**Byron Vincent** 38:45

This podcast is kindly sponsored by Community Justice Scotland and drug deaths in Scotland are, I don't know if you know, they're at an all time high. Have you got any advice for somebody who's grieving over someone they've lost to addiction because that relationship is often incredibly complicated?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 39:03

Yeah, if you can, it's not for everybody, obviously, but if you can find a way of talking about that with people who are on the same page. I found when David was, when his drinking was at his most difficult, I went to Al Anon. And it was simply so I could just be around people who were experiencing the same thing. And that was enormously important. Since he died, I've had the opportunity to have, to speak to a bereavement therapist, which I do every week. And that's been really, really useful. And fortunately, I can pay for that. There are resources there for people who may not be able to pay for access into them and I would just really urge you if you can to do it. I know you don't want to do it, nobody wants to walk into a room and find themselves thinking, Oh God, this is the club I don't want to be part of, but actually if you share those experiences, for me, it made a huge, huge difference, and continues to make a huge difference.

**Byron Vincent** 39:51

Yeah, I mean, I can understand why addicts, speaking as an addict, you know, it can be incredibly difficult to love and we can be explosive and dishonest. When is it reasonable for a partner to step away? And when is it necessary, necessary for a partner to step away? And how do we know?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 40:08

That's such a hard question. I don't find addicts difficult to love, I find addicts difficult to live with. And that was, I never had a problem loving David even when he was at his most self-destructive and indeed destructive. I was fortunate in that I had parts of my life that I could, that was separate from the chaos of his. And that kept me sane, I think. I think you will know if your life becomes unimaginably difficult, unlivable. If your prospects are in pieces, if you're financially ruined, if you're threatened with violence, if you're, if the chaos of an addict's life begins to overwhelm your own. Sometimes you have to step away. I often think about that. And when David was, his drinking was at its most spectacular; other people I knew who'd also been through that would say, you've got to walk away, you've got to walk away, you've got to walk away. And I kind of knew the logic of that. But I also knew that I wasn't going to. That's a personal choice, and a personal choice informed by, you know, the realities and the peculiarities of my own unique circumstances. But sometimes you simply have to, and actually, quite

often, it'll be done for you, because they'll be nicked for something, and they'll end up in prison. And then, you know, see what the world looks like then.

**Byron Vincent** 41:29

Yeah. Can I ask you a couple of questions with your vicar's hat on? I was such an obnoxious atheist as a younger person, the worst kind, you know.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 41:40

So was I!

**Byron Vincent** 41:40

A massively, a massively [inaudible]. I don't really know where it comes from either. I didn't, I don't know where it came from, as a kid. We used to have a religious assembly at school every day. And I refused to bow my head or close my eyes and all of that. And it was just like this weird truculence. And I think maybe it was about having a bit of control in the chaos. Where do you think the impulse to surrender to a higher power comes from?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 42:04

For me, it was realising it was love. I just quite unexpectedly blundered into the way of love. And I just couldn't do anything about that. I didn't, I didn't want it to be there. It was not what I was looking for, perhaps I was, not what I was consciously looking for. But I just found it to be there. And it was like, coming out of the darkness into the light. And I thought, well, I got to live in the light. So I just had to get used to it and still getting used to it. And it takes a bit of time. But the idea is somehow it's quite a persistent one is that once you do that, you then kind of skip around in anticipation of your life in heaven. It's much tougher than that. I remember, there's a lovely... I remember somebody was... I can't remember who it was who said it; I think it was some Dominican, I'm not sure. But he said, whatever the message of Christianity is, if you don't love, you're dead. And if you do love, you'll be killed.  
[Laughter]

**Byron Vincent** 43:04

Strong! In my experience, when things matter, when they work, is when the relationships are authentic.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 43:12

Yeah, exactly.

**Byron Vincent** 43:13

People tend to behave better and want to behave better, when the relationships they're experiencing are real. I've seen some quite remarkable stuff. The relationship between people who just got out of prison and some of the police, for example, that work at the Violence Reduction Unit in Glasgow that I've witnessed, I'm dead inside, and it's reduced me to tears. It's not a common experience for me. So witnessing how transformative a positive relationship can be. When people from across that divide, want to be authentic with each other, and want to be open. It can be a beautiful thing.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 43:49

I think it's also important because actually, what you can't do is just fix people, like you'd fix a car. You can't go with your spanners and service a car, give them an oil change and so on, because you can't, you know very well that lots of the people you're going to deal with, their lives are not going to get easier, Byron, they're really not. They're more likely to get harder, in fact. But even so, within all that, everything that mitigates against human relationships and all that everything erodes, it undermines it, you do find that happen, people will engage authentically and it can be so beautiful when it does happen. Salvatory sometimes when it does happen, not just for the person who's on the victim end of that relationship, but also for the person who's on the powerful end of that relationship, too. I've seen it happen. It's happened to me.

**Byron Vincent 44:30**

Restorative justice can be an incredibly powerful thing. People often see that a lot of these ideas is like wishy washy and easy. But there's nothing easy about changing your entire behaviour. That's a more profound experience than, you know, spending a couple of months in prison.

**Rev. Richard Coles 44:48**

That's absolutely right. And another powerful and difficult truth I've discovered is that, I thought I kind of knew what was best for people. And very often I've discovered I haven't. I felt that when I've been working with the travelling community in particular. And also in, in, in the criminal justice system. Often people do stuff, because it makes sense in their life. And it's a life that I haven't understood. When I've begun to understand it, I began to understand a bit more about behaviour. Behaviour that can sometimes be deeply shocking and outrageous, to the standards that I think are just normal in life. And they, they're not in everybody's life, and you have to try to get a grip on things sometimes.

**Byron Vincent 45:26**

Yeah. And it can be frustrating attempting to understand people's challenges if they're completely out of our field of experience. I think all we can really do when we see people in trouble is be present and compassionate.

**Rev. Richard Coles 45:38**

I think also be courageous if you can. I'm not a naturally courageous person. Quite the opposite, in fact, but through something I've found from David. David, because he would have been a nurse in A&E. He'd spend a lot of his professional life before he was ordained, dealing with people absolutely, on their, in the worst circumstances imaginable. And he was utterly fearless about it. And I think I kind of learned something from him. And I found that when I am dealing with people in circumstances like that, I'm not scared. And it's because it's part of what I, I think it's because it's my, it's a vocational thing, when I understand it as this is, I'm meant to be here doing this somehow. I'm not scared in the way I would be if I just kind of walked into it as a passive observer. It's to do with engagement, isn't it? It's that thing about engagement again. Also, I found it hurts less being punched on duty than off duty.

[Laughter]

**Byron Vincent 46:31**

I guess you've got; you're used to dealing with problematic characters anyway, because you worked in pop, you know, you were a pop star for...



**Rev. Richard Coles** 46:38

Imagine!

**Byron Vincent** 46:38

Yeah, right.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 46:39

The pressures you're under in a successful pop band are unsparing. And although, of course, you enjoy enormous privilege. No man is a hero to his partner in a band, that's for sure. I still think it's better to be a pop star than a prisoner.

**Byron Vincent** 46:54

What I meant was, I guess, because you've had such a varied life. And because you've worn a lot of hats, it will have given you a broader insight than most into the spectrum of human behaviour. And has that helped, when you've been in situations where the person sat across from you seem, might feel very, very alien?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 47:13

Yes, I think so. I think that's probably true. Maybe I flatter myself, but no, I think so. One of the things I find I do is I look at people. And I don't, and I hold their gaze, even if they're aggressive. It happened to me the other day, I was in London, and I was going to the station and around the back of St. Pancras. And I bumped into a guy, a young guy was in his 20s. And he was really, really pissed. I think he was, he was kind of swaying and not making sense. And then I thought maybe he's got some neurological thing happening. Because he seemed to have some of the symptoms of stroke. And he was a young guy, he was well dressed, he was very good looking. And he was talking to me, but I couldn't make out he was saying, and he was getting more and more kind of angry; he wanted me to do something. And I said, What can I do for you? Can I get you something? Do you need me de de de de de? I [inaudible]. And then he came, really got, he put his face into mine, he was really shouting at me, but I just carried on looking at him. And then I said, I'm a priest. Can I pray for you? And it completely took him by surprise, I think. Then he began to cry. And then he just kind of crumpled into me and I ended up hugging him. And then he put himself together and he walked away.

**Byron Vincent** 48:28

See that, those kinds of experiences, it's not a general part of my life, people crumple into me and start sobbing. How do you carry that stuff? How do you, how do you then go to, how do you know, somebody, if somebody's just fallen to pieces on you, how do you then go and you know, do a podcast or whatever it is you're doing next?

**Rev. Richard Coles** 48:46

Because I offer it up, I send it where I've got to send it. And also, like I've said his, his, his, his life is not my life. And I will do what, he will hand that to me and I will hand it on. I've not always been able to do it. I would say sometimes that I've been in situations that I would have been getting stumped, so it doesn't always work right? Or sometimes I've ran away and pissed myself with fear, too. So I don't want

to make myself too, too much of a hero. Actually, that was quite a heroic credit to me. [Laughter] But it is something I pass up. I've sometimes brought stuff home or it stayed with me. And that's been very difficult actually. But most of the time, I think, I, I've got a job to do, right? So, I try to do my job.

**Byron Vincent** 49:33

Look, I'm gonna, I'm gonna love you and leave you because I've got to have...

**Rev. Richard Coles** 49:36

Well it's lovely to talk to you, Byron...

**Byron Vincent** 49:38

And go back to... It's been an absolute joy. Thank you so much. And yeah, I really appreciate it. Thanks a lot.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 49:43

I hope our paths cross again, and if ever I can do anything, just, you've got my email there just to get in touch, yeah?

**Byron Vincent** 49:48

Thank you. Take care.

**Rev. Richard Coles** 49:49

Alright, you too, bye then.