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Insight on our addictions, both visible and subtle

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 21, 2011

BREATHING UNDER WATER: SPIRITUALITY AND THE TWELVE STEPS
By Richard Rohr
Published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, $15.99

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr continues to guide us to greater wholeness. The latest example is his new book, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*. A prolific writer, his books have helped countless souls, especially those who struggle with issues of brokenness and seek transformation. A 21st-century Aquinas, Rohr often takes age-old spiritual ideas and makes them come to life within contemporary contexts and language.

In this new work, Rohr makes the case that the 12-step program, which comes to us through Alcoholics Anonymous, has solid roots in Christian teaching and continues, at a practical level, the healing mission of Jesus. He offers plenty of examples of the ways the 12-step program and the Gospels interrelate.

I was particularly struck by two Rohr insights: We are all addicts, in one way or another, and institutions, nations, and cultures often exhibit addictive neuroses. Consider how contemporary Western culture, for example, draws us to focus on material gains, feeds our sensual desires, and teaches the importance of being in control. He points to American addiction to oil, war and empire and our church?s addiction to its own absolute exceptionalism.

To survive our compulsive behaviors and addictions, Rohr writes, borrowing from a poem by Sacred Heart Sr. Carol Bieleck, that Christians need to learn ?to breathe under water,? that is, courageously to throw themselves into the fullness of God?s love and compassion.

In his book Rohr draws on talks he has given for more than 20 years to recovery groups as well as personal experiences he has had with addicts that he has counseled. ?Almost 25 years ago, I gave a set of talks in Cincinnati to link the wisdom of the 12-step program with what St. Francis called ?the marrow of the Gospel,? ? he tells us. ?I was amazed how obvious and easy a task it was, and was surprised this was not equally obvious to everybody involved in either of these fields.? Rohr says the similar messages of the two teachings assured him we are dealing with a common inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

?How helpful it is to see sin, like addiction, as a disease, a very destructive disease, instead of merely something that was culpable, punishable or ?made God unhappy,? ? Rohr writes. ?If sin indeed made God unhappy, it was because God desires nothing more than our happiness, and the willing healing of our disease.?

Rohr reminds us that healing was at the center of Jesus? ministry.

We learn from Rohr that the 12-step program parallels and makes practical the message that Jesus gave us, but without as much danger of over-spiritualizing that message and pushing its effects into a future, metaphysical world. Curing addictions happens in the here and now.

Rohr likes the practical approach. He prefers a Christianity that is more concerned about healing now and less concerned about divine rewards later on. He says Catholicism suffers from a distortion dating back to the fourth century, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the need grew to agree on certain transcendent truths (for example, Jesus is God, God is Trinity, Mary was a virgin, etc.). Instead of experiencing the very practical steps to human enlightenment, the central message began to involve the divine hereafter. Christianity, explains Rohr, began to place theory over practice. Christians began to concentrate on how to worship Jesus as instead of following Jesus in practical ways.

The 12-step program is not without its own faults, Rohr says. The practical often does not go far enough into deep personal transformation. He writes that the 12-step program has too often stayed at the problem-solving level, and ?missed out on the ecstasy itself -- trustful intimacy with God, or what Jesus consistently called ?the wedding banquet.? ?

The 12-step program begins with the experience and acceptance of one?s powerlessness and works from there. This starting point is fundamental. Again connecting the 12 steps with the Gospel, Rohr says powerlessness is the place where Jesus encountered many during his ministry.

When facing addictions, nothing changes, Rohr writes, unless one finds a spirituality capable of countering denial and reaching into the ?hidden? realm. As Jesus put it, we ?see the splinter in our brother?s or sister?s eye and miss the log in our own.?

He makes the point that we are all, one way or another, spiritually powerless -- and not just those physically addicted to a substance. ?Alcoholics just have their powerlessness visible for all to see. The rest of us disguise it in different ways, and overcompensate for our more hidden and subtle addictions and attachments, especially our addiction to our way of thinking. We all take our own pattern of thinking as normative, logical and surely true, even when it does not fully compute. We keep doing the same thing over and over again, even if it is not working for us.?

At the level of organized religion, Rohr sees us too often failing to spread the core Christian good news of divine compassion and forgiveness. ?We often gave them a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self.? This, he says, has set us up for the atheism, agnosticism, hedonism and secularism we now see in almost all formerly Christian countries. ?I now have more people tell me they are ?recovering Catholics? than those in recovery from addiction. ... Perhaps we failed to give them the good news they desired, needed, and expected??

So where does Rohr finally take us? Where?s the answer to our addictions after we are willing to face them? He says the common universal addiction is to one?s pattern of thinking, which, he states, is invariably dualistic. The primary spiritual path, then, is to some form of contemplative practice to break down ?unhelpful? either-or thinking or superiority thinking.

As for religion, when it does not move people to the mystical or nondual level of consciousness ?it is more a part of the problem than any solution whatsoever.? At the dualistic level, he says, religion ?is largely incapable of its supreme task of healing, reconciling, forgiving and peacemaking.?

Step by step, Rohr finds himself led again into nondualistic mysticism, and to the paradox of both the 12 steps and Gospel teachings: It is in surrendering one wins; in giving one keeps it; and in dying one comes to life.

The good news is old and new at once.

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