

Shape Shifters: Richard Rohr
John 1:1-18 (Erasmus translation)

You know those security questions they ask you to set up, for when you've forgotten your password on an account? Often, one of them is 'the name of your favorite grade school teacher.' Right up there with your mother's maiden name and the city you were born in and the make and model of your first car, the name of that early teacher in your life. Somebody thinks you'll remember that name even if you've forgotten all the passwords you need to manage your life. That's so interesting, isn't it? They're right, of course—at least for me, there's only one elementary school teacher whose name comes readily to mind. I'm never going to forget it, because that teacher made me fall in love with American history. She pointed me toward my college major and law school after that.

In a similar way, of all the wise theologians I've heard and read over many years, one teacher has shaped my faith. It's Richard Rohr, the Catholic theologian we're going to talk about today. More than any other thinker I know, Richard Rohr's understanding of what it means to be a Christian has called me back to that path. He's saved my faith, I think sometimes... when the things I learned before have started to feel too small for the reality of the world.

Richard Rohr is an American Franciscan priest who's in his late 70's now. He served churches for many years before somebody started to realize that a lot of things that come out of his mouth sound different, profound. Literally, a number of Rohr's books have come from recorded talks that he's given—the kind of talks that made someone think, 'I wish I'd taken better notes.'

Some years ago he started a non-profit center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, called *The Center for Action and Contemplation*. It's a place of wisdom and spiritual teaching. It calls together activists, leaders who might be prophets, and spiritual seekers. *Contemplation* is Richard Rohr's main word; what he means by it is *connection*—with God and with other people. You get that connection by listening with the heart as well as the head. The *action* that goes with that kind of contemplation is what we do when we let go of our sense of control, when we choose consciously to cooperate with God's work in the world rather than our own agenda.

There are a lot of Richard Rohr books. He's written on 12-step spirituality, the Enneagram, transition to the second half of life, spirituality specifically for men. Every Lent he goes and lives as a hermit—forty days alone and silent. And every time, it seems, he comes out with some insight he has to write about. Richard Rohr's insights have that rare ability to make me say 'Of course that's true' and 'Wow, I never thought of that' in the same moment.

I want to tell you today about just one Richard Rohr idea that turns me upside down. Maybe it will for you too.

Of all the experiences we try to manufacture for ourselves or that the church tries to inspire us with, there are only two experiences that actually transform us, Richard Rohr says. God comes to people in two experiences that are universal to human life: great love and great suffering. The

reason those experiences transform us is that only these two things—love and suffering—are powerful enough to dismantle our ego protections, all the ways our ego defends us from real change. Only something as compelling as a great love or as consuming as suffering can crack us open to something that's truly bigger than ourselves.

This is the pattern we see in the life of Jesus—unbounded love that made him pour himself out for other people; turning himself over to his own suffering and death. 'Do you see?' Rohr says—those two very human experiences drove Jesus toward the fullness of his life, the whole story of who he was meant to be.

The same is true for us. Maybe you're in the middle of one of those experiences right now. It came to you not because you made a decision to love or suffer, but because you are human. This is the reality of our lives. Love and suffering mark our lives not because life fails us, but because this is exactly how reality works. And God is in that reality of human life. Love and suffering—two ultimately human experiences. They're not distractions from God; they *are* God. Both of them are the way something holy—something ultimate and infinite—grabs our attention and shakes us up.

I think it's the resonance of this idea with my own experience that first startles me and then strikes me as true. Think about your own experience. When you fall in love, you stumble into a sort of addled state where you barely recognize yourself. It's not only the way you look at this other person that's different; it's how you look at everything. It's like a dam gets broken inside of you. Forgiveness and kindness flow right through you; small offenses barely cross your radar. You'll do all kinds of uncharacteristic things to make your loved one happy. Love fills up all the space your self-absorbed self had been occupying fully until the right person came along, or maybe until *this* child was born. This is what I think Jesus was probably talking about: when you fall in love, you die to yourself, so you can fully love someone else.

Suffering—whether it's physical or mental or emotional like grief, can do something similar. Suffering is another door to that room love lets you into. Where only the things that really matter, matter. The magnitude of what's happened to you makes everything else smaller. There's just no time or room for the small things that captured you before. Your loss—pain, or fear, the death of someone you loved, sometimes the death of some part of yourself—changes you.

You can choose to harden around that loss, put a shell of self-protection around your heart. But if you let it do its work in you, suffering can soften and tenderize you, open you to a different kind of connection, a different way of seeing, than you knew before.

Neither one of those experiences lasts forever. We know this. Both the euphoria of falling in love and the sharp point of grief pass. Soon enough, our old, tired judgments, our small disappointments kick in again. We return to the same battles we've been conducting internally all along; we re-take control of our lives.

Or we learn what our experience came to teach us. We can let ourselves be changed. Open our eyes and see that this thing that just came by and swept us up in it—whether it is a surprisingly

powerful love, or a great, painful sadness—came to show you that when you let go of the small thing you were holding onto, something bigger can happen.

That's so counter to the kind of muscular individualism our culture favors, that says, 'Take whatever life gives you and *make* something of it. Go wrestle the world into a shape that looks the way *you* want it to.' The path of a deeper and more spiritual life, Richard Rohr says, is always about surrendering to something, connecting with something that is more than us. That's God at work in us, in all of life.

Here's the thing about Richard Rohr's theology, to me the reason it's so freeing: the point of a life of faith, he says, is not to add extra, impossibly-demanding requirements we have to live up to. Our lives are not saved by spiritual calisthenics or some arduous spiritual path you construct for yourself. You don't *design* a spiritual life; you surrender to it. You can trust God to keep coming to you. If your eyes and your heart are open, if you are conscious about connecting with the God who is everywhere around you, *you will be transformed*, changed into the fully human person you were created to be. Just by living, just by paying attention to your life as it comes to you. 'God comes to you, disguised as your life,'¹ Richard Rohr says often. God comes to you every day, every moment, in the reality of your own life.

Here's what keeps us from seeing that, Rohr says. We are mesmerized by ourselves. What we want, what we need, how we are seen by other people, what we think will make us happy. Unless I practice seeing differently, *I* will take up all the space inside of me. We *need* the great loves of our lives and the losses that lead us into suffering. These are the *cross we must carry*, in Jesus' words—the experiences that will draw us out of ourselves, shake us into lifting our eyes and seeing that we're connected to something bigger.

That isn't an exclusively Christian idea. Wise people from many traditions have noticed the same pattern. Joseph Campbell called it 'the hero's journey'; Native religions speak of it as the Four Directions. In Judaism it's forty years in the desert and finding yourself far from home that mark the way to the Promised Land. In Christianity we say resurrection goes *through* the cross of self-giving and death. In every wisdom tradition the same pattern: the way to life—to salvation—leads through our humanity, that all by itself will contain great love and great suffering both.

So stop struggling, Richard Rohr says to us; stop worrying that you're not doing enough 'spiritual stuff'. The way to God doesn't come by rising above this life, removing yourself to some supernatural plane of existence. It comes *in* this life. Christianity—following Jesus—this is the school where we learn and practice giving our small, self-centered agendas away. We do church because this is where we hold one another through our loves, and our suffering. *This* life, loving and honoring every bit of the wonder and tragedy of your human journey: this is where you will find God.

It's enough.

¹Richard Rohr is quoting Paula D'Arcy when he says this.