

## Home Retreat: Three Foundational Illusions 10.02.24

This is the second of eight reflections by Richard Rohr which I felt needed to be spread to a different audience. He calls this one **Three Illusions**.

Richard begins by saying:

It seems to me that meditation, as John Main taught it, overcomes three foundational illusions that make it almost inevitable that your politics is going to change, your economics is going to be called into question, your socio-economic perspective by which you critique the world will be pretty quickly taken away from you.

He calls the first the move from;

### Doctrine to Experience

First of all, with anyone who regularly meditates, what happens is that these things that we think of as our necessary **ego boundaries** – giving us a sense of our independence, our autonomy, our self and private importance – are little by little taken from us. And this **imperial 'I'**, this **self** that the West thinks is the only self, we discover is not the self at all and it doesn't even matter. And why you are going to spend a great deal of time promoting it, or protecting it, or defending it, or securing it, or proving that it is the best, almost becomes, in fact it does become, a boring question. **Why would you bother with that?** Why would you bother protecting and defending and promoting what is **clearly an illusion**, largely concocted by your own mind games? So, you have committed yourself, in meditation, to let go of those mind games.

Richard recalls that 'when he went through the writings of John Main, he says it again and again and again: Life is about living right here, right now. But he says the mind cannot do that. The mind can do many things, but it *cannot* be present. It cannot be present. It can only **rehash the past**; it can only **worry about the future**, worry about many things.

Take an example: We Catholics beautifully defend what we call the **Doctrine of the Real Presence**. And as an orthodox Catholic, I would

defend it to the hilt, because it is the touchstone of orthodoxy, if you affirm that the spiritual cannot enter the material world, we are in trouble; the Incarnation is over. Clearly it is possible for Jesus to be in bread and wine. Why not? But you know what? After defending that and believing that, I recognise that the word and the concept of **presence** is inherently and necessarily **a relational concept**. You can defend the doctrine of the Real Presence all you want, but if we don't teach the children of God **how to be present to presence**, there is no *Real* Presence. It is just common sense, there is no real presence. **Presence is mutuality**. Presence is giving and receiving. If we had spent as much time teaching you to be present, I think we would have a lot more believers in the Real Presence and we would have far less church division over what became merely a heady doctrine because people had nothing that they had experienced, that they had known for themselves. It became futile arguments about transubstantiation – the *how* – because we didn't experience the *that* or the *what* or the encounter or the mutuality.

So, what happens in meditation is we move beyond doctrines and dogmas to experience. When you move to the level of experience, what happens is the **self** that you thought you had experienced is not to be taken too seriously at all.

Richard moves on to the second illusion and the move from:

### **Thinking to Faith**

Someone who is faithful to meditation, it seems to me, overcomes the illusion that 'my **correct thinking** can get me there'. Honestly, everybody thinks that, on right or left. That's why the liberal-conservative thing is a waste of time. You can be an egocentric liberal and you can be an egocentric conservative. Both of them are simply two forms of the illusion. In the political sphere, we walk around and take these seriously, as if they matter, when all they are is **ego identity** that we dress ourselves up in: 'I am a liberal, I am an orthodox conservative.' I don't think God really cares. It is just something **you** care about because it gives you a **place**

to hang your hook of identity and to give yourself some manufactured self-importance.

Correct thinking is always trapped inside of my little mind, my particular culture, my practical form of education, the parenting that I was given – all of which are good and all of which are bad. So that places it inside our world, where we would be wiser to be much humbler about it all – a place where we can know, but alongside that knowing, accompanying every bit of our knowing, is the knowing that we don't know.

That's why the great tradition was called both the kataphatic tradition, knowing through images and words, and the apophatic tradition, almost lost in the West, certainly after the Reformation, where we had any understanding or appreciation of the freedom of not knowing and of not needing to know and that that was okay. And strangely enough, it was a new kind of knowing. In fact we had a word for it called 'faith', a kind of knowing that didn't need to know, a kind of not needing to hold everything so perfectly in your own finite mind because at a deeper level you were being held. And that experiential knowledge of being held freed you from the obligation of 'I have to hold myself'. It took years for Richard to understand this, even though this is straight Franciscan teaching, that his mind mind could not get him there, and in fact, there was something better than **thinking he could work it out by thinking further.**

Richard reflects that 'When I was a young man I had always liked ideas and books and so forth. I am not really an intellectual but I still liked ideas. And I remember going into bookstores – if I'd be truthful, I still go to Barnes and Noble, and Borders – and I almost prayed to the Holy Spirit, 'okay, which is the right book? Just guide me to the right one that will give me all the answers.'" He needs to do that less and less, especially when he comes back from the hermitage. Invariably he has no desire to read a book, usually for the next three or four weeks. Then it wears off because he gets back to the world of forms and appearances, and he thinks there is another necessary idea. It is very interesting that immediately afterwards,

at a deeper level, he knows there is nothing in any book that is going to be better or more solid than what he'd just experienced on a cellular level, a level at which you know that it is okay, you know that you are okay even though everything is terrible. He says that is how you learn to live with this world of paradox – that there is a knowing that surpasses this world of contradiction and inconsistency, and the dilemmas that we face every day.

Finally, in a short section Richard moves from the illusion of

### Collective Identity to the experience of Personal Identity

So, meditation overcomes the autonomous, independent ego. It overcomes the illusion that my correct thinking can get me there. And it overcomes the fear that develops from my perception of the previous two. That's why your politics changes. That's why your view of the world changes, because you don't live inside that encapsulated self, you don't think that my little mind has to figure it out. So, instead, I wrap myself around with my collective opinions.

Truth is a coincidence of opposites. It demands some shadowboxing with the shadow side of reality. And if you are not willing to do that, if you just want the Tories to be alright or Labour to be alright or Great Britain to be alright, **you are incapable of truth**. When everything becomes a **belonging system** instead of a **transformational experience**, everybody simply localises themselves inside their little belonging system and there their fragile ego can take on some sense of identity and power: 'I don't have it, I am not very smart, but we Catholics as a group are smart'; 'I don't know very much about how we are changing the climate but this little island can't be making much difference.'

So, we slide inside our collective identities precisely because we have not **gone deep** to find a personal identity, to **discover who we are**, as St Paul says, 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:3).

Many thanks for listening. There is a suggested timetable below for the rest of the day.

## Suggested Timetable

- 11.00 Talk
- 11.30 Coffee/tea break
- 12.00 Read talk again and reflect on your own illusions.
- 13.00 Tune in to Sext. Lunch Break
- 14.00 Siesta/garden/walk
- 15.00 Read 'Mystics and the Margins'
- 16.00 Tea break
- 17.00 Read 'From ignorance to knowledge' & 4<sup>th</sup> letter from outside the camp.
- 18.00 Vespers