

Richard Rohr- One Of My Spiritual Guides

When the invitation was extended to me to share about someone whose faith has influenced or guided me on my spiritual journey I got quite excited and thought -“what a rich topic and what a rich focus - trust the pastors of Nutana Park Church to come up with such creative and spiritually uplifting ideas for the worship service. Then, upon further reflection I became quite overwhelmed with the task. How do I chose just one spiritual guide as I have been blessed with so many - ranging from ordinary folks, family members, to spiritual leaders with international acclaim - not to mention saints such as St. Theresa of Lisieux who taught, the “Little Way”, of doing ordinary things, little things, with great love. And mystics like Julian of Norwich, who lived during the plague and who was quoted as saying, “all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well”. Her words have been particularly reassuring for me in these times of Covid. And Nutana Park Mennonite Church collectively has provided strong spiritual nurturance- modelling community building, service and strong support for living out ones Christian values. All the church pastors that I have encountered could easily have qualified as one of my spiritual guides. Also two deceased parishioners stand out as spiritual guides: Allan Reese and Allan Klassen- both being spiritual guides through the way they lived their lives, modelling kindness, integrity, wisdom, charity, compassion and love. Allan Reese’s last words to the congregation, “little children love one another, adults love one another”, have been permanently etched on my heart. Allan Klassen’s sermon on Aug. 19, 2018 entitled: Connections with Mother Earth, in which he shared a quote about, “ seeing the earth as

source rather than resource,” stuck with me and strongly influenced the way I now see the earth.

But I did manage to make a choice. I chose Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is also the Academic Dean of the Learning School for Action and Contemplation. I chose him because he is a primary spiritual guide for me at this stage of my spiritual journey. He has written many books, lectured widely, given many retreats, developed many YouTube videos and offers an online daily meditation program.

I first encountered him many years ago when I was studying the enneagram which is an ancient tool for spiritual growth. He has written a book on the enneagram and also teaches it on line through YouTube videos.

For those not familiar with the enneagram, to use Richard Rohr’s words, “it describes 9 personality types, or possible ways we can act like chickens [false personality] instead of the eagles we were meant to be, [our true selves]”.

Since I wanted to soar like the eagles, I took up the task of working the enneagram. It is a life time journey. But with it’s teaching that we are all wounded and that of the nine personality types no number is any better or worse than another-just different- and that one can be unhealthy, average or redeemed within ones number, it really helped me appreciate peoples’ different prospectives and ways of being. Before working the enneagram I used to think that if people really had it together, so to speak, they would all think like me. But Richard Rohr’s teaching of the enneagram is not the reason I chose him to focus on as there are many competent teachers of the enneagram.

I have two main callings at this time of my life-one is to promote healing in all my family relationships, and the other is to do what I can to promote healing between Indigenous and non Indigenous people in Canada- to tackle racism! And interestingly enough I realize that both these callings require virtually the same process to manifest - the process of changing myself - seeing with new eyes- listening, dialoguing - the process of building relationships of kinship.

Recently there was a cartoon in the Star Phoenix entitled; “ Meeting the Insidious Viruses”, depicting a Covid virus, very small in size, talking to a very large Racist virus. The small Covid virus says, “they created an effective vaccine for me in less than a year”! The large Racist virus responds by saying, “Amateur”! That cartoon put the evil of racism in perspective for me and reinforced my desire to do what I can to reduce its impact. Then, recently one morning I had an epiphany of sorts when I was praying with scripture. I was doing a form of prayer called Lectio Divina, that Rohr encourages. It comes from the monastic tradition and is a practice of lingering and going to the depth of a text. That morning I was reading from Exodus where God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of the slavery in Egypt to the promised land of milk and honey. All of a sudden it hit me that I/we too could say, “here we are Lord”, and be open to the task of helping to lead people out of the slavery of racism to the promised land of, “Peace and Unity”! But I realized that first we need to spend time in the wilderness! That’s where Richard Rohr was/is such a wonderful spiritual guide for me.

In relation to promoting healing in all my family relationships, I thought it would be helpful to find a book that all my family members could study together and I stumbled

across Richard Rohr's book, *Breathing Under Water-Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*.

There are substance abuse issues in my family so I thought this book, based on the 12 step program, could be quite useful. I found it fascinating that as I was pondering this, my little grandson, who was on a sleepover, woke up in the morning and said, "grandma I had a dream last night, I dreamed that I could breath under water. That's all I dreamed, just that I could breath under water."! WOW! I thought my discernment on this is over-I have my answer.

The spiritual teachings in this book are far too numerous for me to share in this context but Richard broadens the definition of addiction well beyond substance abuse- he talks about us all being addicts-that we all suffer from a Universal Addiction- the addiction to our own way of thinking, and in other words, addicted to our false self. With this Universal Addiction, I quote, "everything gets filtered through our own fear, our own culture bias, our own anger, our own limitations and our lack of education" and I would add, our childhood conditioning- "which binds us all"! He says we are all afraid of freedom- that we rarely deal with our false self. But when we get to our true self we are not afraid of freedom- we love God and can freely act out that love. He even goes so far as to suggest that addiction could perhaps be a helpful metaphor for what the biblical tradition called sin and says, "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." "If sin made God unhappy", he says, "it was because God desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of our disease". He says, "the healing ministry of Jesus was about all that he did, with much of his teaching illustrating the healings-and vice

versa"! Richard goes on to say, "that we can't be satisfied with merely overcoming the, "substance addiction". Until we achieve emotional sobriety where our emotional life quits going up and down, we are not really in recovery and that's, he says, " what contemplation is teaching - how to take charge of this self referential world with its ups and downs all the time and then he says until one has a vital spiritual experience he doesn't believe the recovery goes to any depth to effect any long term transformation. "It's vital," he says, "that this small world has to be shaken up so that we become aware that we are all part of something much bigger and that we are all being guided by our Higher Power". He says "God doesn't seem to care how She/He is called-all we have to do is get the relationship right. But the absolute starting point", he says, "is the experience of powerlessness- that's where we must all begin".

I certainly have had the experience of powerlessness but with me these experiences happen many times. But when they arrive I now see them as opportunities for new beginnings-new possibilities on my spiritual journey.

But in terms of getting our relationship right, Richard Rohr has so much wisdom and theological teachings in his book, "The Universal Christ", that has strongly impacted me. Actually I am still overwhelmed by the teachings in this book and still trying to absorb all that he has shared.

He starts off by saying, "Christ is not Jesus last name", and then goes on to talk about, "the Cosmic notion of Christ [that] competes with and includes everyone and everything and allows Jesus Christ to finally be a God figure worthy of the entire universe. With this understanding of the Christian message, the Creator's love and presence are grounded in

the created world, and the mental distinction between, “natural” and, “supernatural” sort of falls apart.”

“Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply”. He says, “I call that kind of deep and calm seeing “contemplation”.

I have always wanted to lead a more contemplative life but doing always seemed to take over. It seems to me that our dominant culture values doing over contemplation. Richard's words have encouraged me to seek a better balance between contemplation and doing in order to experience the deeper dimensions of life.

Growing up on the farm my whole childhood was immersed in nature. Even though I was never taught to experience God in nature- in the plants and animals, looking back I realize that I always felt so at peace, so at one, with all of creation. I suspect that's why I feel so much kinship with Indigenous people who traditionally, I understand, saw the land owning them instead of them owning the land.

Richard Rohr's concept of, “The Universal Christ,” the Cosmic Christ, who always was, and always will be, Christ who is in all of life, in everything and everybody, really broke open for me the Bible passage: Ephesians 2. 22: “In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a Holy Temple in the Lord in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God”.

It brought back words that were once shared with me, that we are all drops in the ocean but also oceans in a drop- inextricably, interconnected with all of creation and the indwelling Christ.

With this understanding I feel that I am standing on firmer ground and much more able to say, “here I am Lord”, knowing that Christ is with me all the way.