

## HOPE AGAINST DARKNESS:

### The Transforming Vision of St. Francis in an Age of Anxiety

This was published in 2001, so is one of Richard Rohr's earlier books. It is immediately apparent that here is a prophet who understands our post-modern times and has a radical approach to managing their pitfalls. Richard's style is that of giving a talk. In Part 1 he shows how our inner world of meaning has not been fed, and uses St. Francis' viewpoint to illustrate: *'Francis stepped into a Church that seems to have been largely out of touch with the masses. But he trusted a deeper voice and a bigger truth. He sought one clear center and moved out from there. The one clear centerpiece was the Incarnate Jesus.'*

I make no apology for quoting frequently as you deserve Richard's text rather than mine!

The postmodern mind is a deconstructed world view and in Part 2, devoted to 'Francis the Rebuilder', Richard states that *'History has shown us how rare it is for people to be both in the world and yet not of the world, as Jesus has called us. This will always remain the Franciscan ideal. The greatest vocation is not the contemplative, nor is it the active, but the utter art form of putting the two together.'* It is a subject that interests us very much.

Part 3 is devoted to helping us find a 3<sup>rd</sup> Way, neither Fight nor Flight, but the way of compassionate knowing. *'Only God can hold such an act together within us. The small self is always too small. Only the True Self can live the gospel.'* Both the ways of fight and of flight fall short of wisdom. The dualistic mind seemingly has a preference for knowing things by comparison. By temperament most of us prefer one side to the other, which frees us from the tension and the anxiety. *'Only a few dare to hold the tension in the middle, which is the 'folly' of the cross, where you cannot prove you are right, but only 'hang' between the good and the bad thieves of every issue.'*

He ends the book with a Reconstructionist Creed which allows us to 'Begin Again' as St. Francis said. I warmly recommend it to you.

That is the outline which Richard expands to guide us. At the beginning he discusses how we have been through the Age of the Mind, when *'analysis of parts became more important than the synthesis of the whole.'* Then the Holocaust happened, and he reckons that the collapse into postmodern thinking began at that point for Europeans. *'If we can be this wrong, maybe nothing is right. All our major institutions failed us.'* Now, unfortunately: *'It is basically a 'crime and punishment' scenario, instead of the 'grace and mercy' world that Jesus proclaims.'*

So how to move on from this? *'I know that every age has had its pain, but spirituality is about what you do with your pain. Most human pain has been transmitted to others.'* This scapegoating mechanism can be seen as the central story line of human history. *'Jesus did the victim thing right. He neither played the victim for his own self-aggrandizement nor did he make victims of*

*other people. He became the liberating and forgiving victim. This pattern is rare but whenever it happens it exercises an immense healing and reconciliation influence.'* And then:

*'The message of the crucified Jesus is a statement about what to do with your pain now. What we've done is to make Jesus into the one who could keep us from pain later'. We've missed the entire transformative message.*

Richard calls the way of Fight that of Simon the Zealot, and often the way of the cultural liberal. *'The zealot is always looking for the bad person over there. He permits himself righteously to attack them, to hate them, even to kill them. We can take it as a general rule that when we don't transform our pain we will always transmit it. Basically zealots want to do something to avoid holding the pain until it transforms them. But "resurrected" people prayerfully bear witness against evil – they also agree compassionately to hold their own complicity in that same evil. It is not over there, it is here. It is our problem, not theirs.'*

The second tactic of flight is the way of the Pharisee: *'the uninformed, falsely innocent and often conservative type. They deny the pain. There will be no problems. They are also subject to hypocrisy, projection or illusion; we are right and you are wrong.'* In this way:

*'Paul symbolically had to be thrown to the ground and have scales fall from his eyes to admit that he was a self-serving Pharisee.'*

Jesus took the harder path, to know and still forgive and still understand. *'The Third Way is impossible except for the True Self, hidden with Christ in God. In this so-called age of anxiety when we are anxious we want to get rid of that anxiety as quickly as we can. Yet we have to learn to hold patiently a certain degree of anxiety. If we can't do this we will always be looking for somewhere to expel it. The alternative is very different; faith only builds on that totally positive place within, however small. It needs an interior "Yes" to begin, like that of Mary. God needs just a place that is open to grace. We have been given the way to get there, how to fight hate without becoming hate ourselves. We have been given a Companion and a Friend and not just a good idea. We have been given joy in the midst of failure, and not just a way of winning or being right. Gospel people are basically indestructible.'*

Faith allows us to hold the tension until we can recognize the true evil, of which we are a part. That's foundational to all compassionate and non-violent thinking.

Richard's thought is focussed on the Cross and its message. He sees how some people understand it as a self-punishment; they fall back into that pre-gospel thinking that they have to earn God's love. Others think it's just something Jesus did once to resolve some heavenly transaction that was needed, but it wasn't really an agenda for us or for now. Whereas:

*'The cross is how to work for the answer without becoming part of the problem itself. Look to any number of wars to see why this is right. People seek reform by way of fighting and the use of power. Most revolutions begin on the left of the political spectrum and end on the right. This movement is inevitable if the self is not transformed. Jesus is, in some way, the only true revolutionary.'*

*Most revolutions merely rearrange the furniture on the deck of the Titanic. Jesus built a new boat.'*

He finishes the Chapter Beyond Victimhood with a conversation between the Crucified Christ and ourselves which is most profound. *'We see that he became what we are all afraid of and what we deny: nakedness, vulnerability and failure. He became the crucified who refused to crucify back, and thus stopped the inevitable pattern of death'.*

We proceed, through 'Great Awakenings' with a section on 'The Security to be Insecure' and A sense of Community', when he states that 'until we question our very lifestyle nothing truly new is going to happen.' *We must live ourselves into a new way of thinking. It is lifestyle choices that finally change us and allow us to see in new ways. Jesus does not directly take on social reform. Instead he preaches a life of simplicity and non-violence that is simply outside the system of power, money and control. More than directly fighting the system, he ignores it and builds an alternative worldview where power and prestige are not sought or even admired. He opts out of the reward and punishment system'.*

Richard feels that the Western mind refuses to be in awe any more.' *It is only aware of what is wrong, and incapable of rejoicing in what is still good and true and beautiful'. The only way out is a new imagination created by positive God experience. 'Only great religion can do that, which is why Jesus spent so much of his ministry trying to reform religion. Nothing less will do. Healthy religion gives you a foundational sense of awe. It re-enchants an otherwise empty universe. It gives people a universal reverence toward all things. Only with such reverence do you find confidence and coherence.'*

Chapter 4 is on Transformation: for the past 30 years we've been experts at planning change. *'We are now natural fixers, changers of our own reality. It makes for a different kind of soul. It develops the calculative mind, as opposed to the goal of all mature spirituality, the contemplative mind. The attitude that is needed for deep seeing is not a calculating stance, but much more an attitude of listening, trusting and waiting. I use the concepts of faith and the contemplative mind almost interchangeably. They are the same reality, both describing the trustful and God-centered way that we can allow ourselves to be used. In this different mind we do not so much try to change reality or others, as allow ourselves to be changed, so that we can be useable for God'.*

In Belly of the Whale Richard states that transformation happens not when something new begins but when something old falls apart: *'The pain of falling apart invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. Change just happens, but transformation is always a process of letting go.'*

Then he discusses the loss of criteria: *'almost all peoples who have lived on the planet were certain about the Highest, and therefore moved downward and outward with clarity. This certainty created a reference point for naming the Good and the True. If there is a creator, everything else is a creature and*

*reflects the divine image. Either you see God in everything or you have lost the basis for seeing God in anything. Once the dualistic mind takes over, the ego is back into a 'pick and choose' game, which is the beginning of exclusionary religion.'*

Chapter 5 The Cosmic Egg of Meaning is of great importance, with its illustrative diagram of the Egg. Three domes are described:

The 1<sup>st</sup> My Story – just me': Private, small life seeking significance through power and possessions.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> is Our Story – We are:' Group identities and loyalties that expand our self of self. This includes ethnicity, groupthink, Nationalism, cultural religion.

Then the 3<sup>rd</sup> dome: 'The Story – What is;'' This has the patterns that are always true. It saves us from the illusions of "we" and the smallness of "me".

*Richard says that 'Liberal types tend to get trapped in the first dome of private meaning. They are prone to individualistic worldviews. Conservative types tend to get stuck in the 2<sup>nd</sup> dome of group and trivial loyalties. But both progressive and traditional thinking can be a way to avoid the great surrender to God. To both of them, the act of faith will still feel like dying to their own certitudes. The person who lives within the total cosmic egg is the mystic, the universal man or woman, the saint, the whole one. These are people like Mahatma Gandhi, Saint Bonaventure, Mother Teresa and Julian of Norwich They look out at the smaller pictures because they observe from the utterly big picture. However we are going to reconstruct, it's going to come from people who can see reality at all three levels simultaneously.'* The diagram and concept of the Cosmic Egg is extremely simple and extremely true.

Chapter 6, Getting a Whole New Head says that ' We need more than cerebral, rational knowing. We need to move toward a more spacious, contemplative knowing, beyond the dualistic seesaw mind, quick judgements, the self and its own self-interest, beyond either/or worldviews. Only the whole self is ever ready for the Whole God.' Richard talks about ways of knowing and lenses – 'the first being intellectual knowing, the next volitional knowing, then emotional, then by the senses, the imaginative, the aesthetic and, finally, epiphanic knowing, when there is a parting of the veil, an awareness of self and the Other.'

Part 2 concerns Francis – showing the way towards reconstruction. Richard sees that 'Francis' reading of the gospel is of utmost relevance today. His focus and emphasis is the same as Jesus'.

*'When he read the inaugural discourse of Jesus, he saw that the call to be poor stood right at the beginning: "How blessed are the poor in spirit!" As a result Franciscan spirituality has never been an abstraction. It is grounded in Jesus' specific instructions to his disciples and not in theology. Francis' living of the gospel was lifestyle pure and simple. It was the Incarnation continuing in space and time. It was the presence of the Spirit taken absolutely seriously. It was being Jesus more than simply worshipping him.'*

In the section 'Man of Joy' Richard relates the story from 'The Little Flowers of St. Francis' – *The Dialogue of perfect joy*. This finishes with: 'Above all the

*graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ gives to his friends is that of conquering oneself and willingly enduring sufferings, insults, humiliations, and hardships for the love of Christ.'*

He finds that in one story Francis has realigned all of our usual responses, our loyalties and the very shape of reality as most of us have designed it. Clearly this is a different kind of 'I' that is speaking here, an *'I hidden with Christ in God'* (Colossians 3:3). This is the goal of all transformation. *'It is not so much a description of perfect joy as one of perfect freedom. Here we have a truly non-violent man. Only such as these will liberate others. These free ones must be the rejoicing of God. These few reassure us that whoever this Creator is, God is most assuredly not omnipotence, but humility.'*

One of the most quoted lines of Francis is attributed to his final days. He told the Friars: *'Let us begin again, for up to now we have done nothing.'* That enigmatic sense of beginning again at the end of life – that is the gift for reconstruction that we want to discover in this book. Most simply Francis is saying that we cannot change the world except insofar as we have changed ourselves. *'We can only offer to others what God has done in us. We have no real head answers. We must be an answer.'*

Part 3 opens with a Prayer for Presence which I recommend to you. Richard then discusses what is our window on reality. He says that we need *'a still point of the turning world,'* (T.S. Eliot in *Burnt Norton, II*) and that is why he emphasizes contemplation. *'In the spiritual journey you will naturally detach from self-images as you draw closer to God. To be present with God you will gradually become transparent and vulnerable, you will gradually let go of masks, identities. That can only happen if we're willing to know that our self-image is not the deepest me. There's much more.'* It is no longer I but Christ living in me *"(Galatians 2:20)'*.

It is just not possible to tell you about the whole of this book in a short paper, but I hope I have related enough to give you an idea of how strongly Franciscan it is. It is a book to be discussed and read a short section at a time as it is so concentrated. My copy is now well worn with much underlining of important passages. So it is a working book, and work is in progress.

The Epilogue is a quote from the Book of Nehemiah 2: 17-18:  
*'Come let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and suffer this indignity no longer...Let us start! Let us build; and with willing hands they set about the good work.'*

That, and, of course:  
*'Brothers, let us begin again, for up to now we have done nothing.'*

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