



Meditatio
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Action & Contemplation

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***The mature position is where you are finally doing
a dance between inner authority and outer authority.***

Excerpts from the John Main Seminar 2005, California,
A Lever and a Place to Stand

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*To be contemplative, we
need to have a slight
distance from the world.
But for this not to become
escapism, we have to
remain close to the
world, loving it, feeling its
pains and joys as our
pains and joys.*

1

Action and Contemplation

When I named the Centre in Albuquerque, 'The Centre for Action and Contemplation', back in '86, we argued about whether 'contemplation' should be first or 'action' should be first. I chose to put 'action' first. I am still insistent that you don't have anything to contemplate till you have lived a bit, acted a bit, made some mistakes, dove in to the mystery of life. Otherwise you too often, it seems to me, end up contemplating your navel and calling it the great mystery or calling it God.

So I put 'action' first: 'Action and Contemplation'. But then of course, again and again, people would ask which was the more important – the impossible, useless question because they are eternally united in one embrace, two sides of one coin as we say. But I always say 'action' is not the important word, 'contemplation' is not the important word, 'and' is the important word. How do you put the two together? I am 62 now and I am still working on it.

It certainly is the great art form, to begin perhaps in mysticism and to end in what looks like politics. But actually both of them look different in the final mix. And that's the art form, that's the great dance that we will be working towards this weekend.

I found John Main so helpful, not in an obvious way; he doesn't talk much directly, as you know, about social issues, about current political issues. He simply in a way trivialises them by not paying attention to some of them which grab us for the moment, which entertain us.

I'm lucky enough, as a Franciscan, to do my Lent in a hermitage every few years. And during that time of course I am cut off from the news and the newspapers and the TV. I am always struck when I return that I haven't missed anything, nothing substantial. Really, it is amazing! And yet each night when you're there watching, you are

made to feel you are in on some momentous thing that really matters. You realise it has largely been manufactured to fill up the half hour and to make you feel this is monumental or important, when there is really only, as John Main says, 'one mystery, one truth, one sadness, one love, one life' and it is just showing different forms. He calls it in several places, 'the universal consciousness of the Risen Christ' which holds this great one picture together. Augustine called this movement the Paschal mystery – the mystery of transformation, the mystery of movement, of life and death, cross and resurrection.

I used to give a regular talk to incoming interns at the Centre to try to re-establish in their minds this essential link between action and contemplation. It was easy to begin with Exodus 3, the story of the burning bush. You can call that an inner experience, a transcendent experience, based in nature, however, not in the synagogue or temple. Most of the great theophanies are in the natural world, where the natural patterns are more obviously seen very often. But within three sentences after Moses has had his 'ah-ah-ah' heart-stopping experience, within three sentences, what Yahweh says to him is, 'I have heard the groaning of my people in Egypt (Ex 3:7).' He doesn't let him sit around inside his gooey experience and unpackage it for five years. He gives it immediate focus, implication and direction.

We had a conference in early July in Albuquerque on the spirituality of the 12 Steps and its connection with the gospel, which I think is a profound and immediate connection. But I pointed out to the crowd there how Bill Wilson's 12th Step, which he was very insistent on, told the alcoholics in the early period that they would never really come to appropriate the power, the importance, the depth of the first 11 Steps until and unless they personally took it upon themselves to give it away to the one other person.

I know in many ways, if I have grown at all in my 35 years as a priest, it's in part because of this role of being a preacher and a teacher, where I've had to stand up before crowds like you constantly and describe what I thought I believed, and then having to ask myself again and again, 'Do I really believe that?' And in my

attempt to communicate it, finding very often that I had only scratched the surface. There is some truth that in sharing it, handing it over, in giving it away, you really maybe for the first time appropriate it yourself, because this mystery that we are talking about, this substantial mystery, is a mystery of participation. And I think that's one of the great strengths of your work, and of all contemplative groups, that more often than not, even though we try to be faithful to our individual daily prayer and daily meditation, we also commit ourselves to doing it in groups, almost as if to recognise that whatever is happening is not just happening in me but is happening in us together and I need to know that by even physically placing myself in that context, doing it in groups.



2

Three Illusions

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.

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 to let go of those mind games.

When I went through the writings of John Main, he says it again and again and again: It 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.

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 deny 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.

From Thinking to Faith

Secondly, 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 ego-centric 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 rightfully be much more humble 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 me years to understand, even though this is straight Franciscan teaching, that my mind could not get me there and in fact there was something better than thinking I could work it out by thinking further.

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.' I need to do that less and less, especially when I come back from the hermitage. Invariably I have no desire to read a book, usually for the next three weeks, four weeks. Then it wears off because I get back to the world of forms and appearances and I think there is another necessary idea. It is very interesting that immediately afterwards, at a deeper level, I know there is nothing in any book that is going to be better or more solid than what I'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. Do you understand? That is how you learn how 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.

From Collective Identity to 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 perceives from the previous two. That's why your politics changes. That's why your view of the world changes, because you don't live inside of that encapsulated self, you don't think that my little mind has to figure it out, so I wrap myself around my opinions.

Truth is a coincidence of opposites. It demands some shadow-boxing with the shadow side of reality. And if you are not willing to do that, if you just want the Republicans to be alright or the Democrats to be alright or America to be alright, you are incapable of truth. When everything becomes a belonging system instead of a transformational experience, everybody simply localises themselves inside of 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 oppressing the world but this many Americans can't be wrong.'

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).



3

A Different Viewpoint

When we overcome those foundational illusions in early meditation, I think it inevitably moves us towards a different viewpoint.

Remember every viewpoint is a view from a point. Now if the point from which you view life is simply my Richard Rohr self, my American male, educated Catholic self, I've got to defend all those little identities. But yes we were the one true church, we were going to heaven. And then you discover as life goes on that every religion believes that. It is called 'group narcissism'. There is only one thing more dangerous than individual egocentricity, and that's group egocentricity – when the group together agrees upon the same lie, and then reassures its membership that we are the only saved ones, doing the same thing which we will always do if we do not experience substantial reality. We will fall in love with forms; we will defend forms; we will promote clichés and external doctrines and dogmas.

So until the illusions are taken away from us by some form of inner journey – we are calling it meditation, we are calling it contemplation – if there is no inner experience, the mind will almost always remain what we call a dualistic mind. It can only think in terms of winners or losers. It can't even get energy. It can't even get motivation. I do a lot of men's work and I have to say I see this especially in my brothers, in men. They just love a win/lose situation. They just get energy as soon as there is a team to beat or a nation to destroy, or a group to be right and another group to be wrong. You take that away from them and there is actually a palpable loss of interest and motivation in whatever is happening if you cannot demarcate that into good guys and bad guys. Now that is the very demarcation that is grabbed away from you in meditation. It falls apart – the dualistic mind, the either/or thinking.

That's why of course almost all the great spiritual teachers tell us, in one form or another, 'Do not judge.' Whatever they mean by that, it's that the judging mind is the dualistic mind. It is just the same; it is always comparing and competing. Men tend to compete more, women tend to compare more; but it's the same ego game. Are judgements necessary? Of course they are, on certain levels. It took me a long time to recognise that my need to judge was not really a desire for the truth. My need to judge was a desire for control: to be in control of the data; to be in control of the explanation; to define the pecking order (who's up, who's down; who's in, who's out; who's right, who's wrong; who's superior, who's inferior). That's what is taken away from you and that's why many will never go there, because who wants that power to be taken from you? It gives us small comfort but comfort nevertheless – momentary comfort that I am right, and that's the first need of the ego.

The ego defines itself by negation and by contraction: 'I'm not that, I am not like those; I am not a sinner; I am not a communist.' For something that you're not (what a convenient but completely ineffective form of transformation) demands nothing of you whatsoever except putting someone else down. And that's supposed to, for some strange reason, pull you up? But people keep doing it. I think history will continue to do it, until and unless, until we find the true self. The false self will always need to win, will always need to be right, will always need to defeat the other.

The ego defines itself by contraction, pulling itself in, saying 'no, I am not like...'. The soul defines itself by expansion, not by 'no' but by 'yes'; by letting down our ego boundaries and letting the other in – letting in the face of the other, the opinion of the other, the worldview of the other, letting down the boundaries and barriers.

I can see why Jesus said this will be a 'narrow path and few will follow it (Mt 7:14)'. Because I think on the unconscious level, we know that is going to change our politics, we know that is going to change our worldview. If I keep doing this meditation, I cannot just keep self-securing, I cannot just keep self-validating. In fact I don't even need to because I have been validated, or as Paul and Luther would say 'justified'. And once that radical justification has taken place, that

radical legitimation of the self in God, together all as one, then the parts take on less and less importance.

So it seems to me that what meditation does is that it grounds you utterly in a pre-existent wholeness before you identify with the partialities, the partisanship. And of course, if for 40 years you have identified with the partialities, the partisanship, the little loyalty systems, it's pretty risky to have those taken away from you. If your whole identity is that you're a Republican or a Democrat, you better not pray, right? You really better not, because your Republican/Democrat identity just isn't going to mean a great deal. And yet it astounds me in how many of our Christian communities that it is still the foundational identity, that these people's loyalty system is tied with passing political shows. How could we possibly be dealing with substantial truth?

I don't think that Democrats and Republicans existed in the time of Jesus. It must be something previous to that. In fact the American flag – correct me if I am wrong – I don't think Jesus ever saw one; I very much doubt whether He would salute it. He taught about the kingdom of *all* the earth. You'd better not top this one, right? Suddenly you're going to have no place to lay your head. That's exactly what he said. He said the whole world will hate you. Why? Because now you are not on either side of the usual categories, the usual loyalty systems and groups, which is exactly where the ego wants to be to shore itself up, to give itself a foundation and a security that it does not have.

So what we can do is go to another place for our foundation and security. Of course, as many other teachers have said, once you say 'Jesus is Lord', then of course the logical consequence of that is no one else is. No one else is! And yet see how history has been formed by even Christian loyalties to the lords of this earth, whoever they might be in their six-year terms or 10-year terms or 50-year tyrannies; whoever they might be.

If you have been faithful to John Main's magnificent and brilliant and utterly simple teaching on meditation for even three years and you haven't experienced a seismic shift in your viewpoint – how you view the world – then I don't think you're praying. If contemplatives

are cut off from social prophesy and they become another resource of the culture instead of a resource against the culture, such contemplatives are living in a major illusion and they have made contemplation itself into another way to feel morally superior. This would be your great danger. I certainly am not saying that with any sense of accusation against this group because it has not been my experience at all. But I must say that, in some circles I have been in, it has been the new word just like 'charismatic' was back in the 70s; it was the way to feel I've just got one up on everybody else.

The disguises of the ego, brothers and sisters, are endless, endless. And so we've almost got to find a way to make sure I am not just seeking moral high ground in my own eyes or in the eyes of anybody else. Is this leading me to a new vulnerability, to a new, what John Main calls, 'dispossession' instead of a new possession – 'I have', 'I am'? Be careful of any 'I have' or 'I am' language except the great 'I am' in God.



4

One Truth

Every April in Santa Fe they have this marvellous conference on 'Science, Consciousness and Religion'. There are basically about four major scientists for the most part speaking each day. It was just like the best retreat I ever made. Anyway, it wasn't priests or lecturers or theologians speaking to me but scientists, who we used to think were the enemies of religion as you know. But they are becoming our best friends and say it much better than many of us trained in theology do. They have this wonderful ability to show there is one world, one truth. Maybe they have come to it through their own thinking, but we're coming to that same thing through our being. It levels the playing field. We don't have to be smart; we don't have to have two PhDs. We just have to be present.

A Jewish scientist was speaking. He told me something I had never been told in all my studies of the Hebrew Scriptures. He pointed out the word that was unspeakable to the Jewish people – 'Yahweh', the name for God. You know, in Hebrew the vowels are not printed, just the consonants; you fill in the vowels. But the word was not only unspeakable, that just the consonants were used in the spelling. But then, he took it one step further. He pointed out that even the consonants used in the word Yahweh are, in his opinion, the only Hebrew consonants that do not allow you to close your lips. He just stood there in front of us: 'Y a h w e h, Y a h w e h, Y a h w e h, Y a h w e h'. Many people were in tears (he went on much longer than I just did) to recognise what the great teachers of meditation have been teaching us, that they knew this God could not be captured in any form of words and don't you dare try to close your lips around it and think you have it. The identification was with the very intake and exhalation of breath. And the word they came up with for God, the great 'I Am', was the breath itself – the great

Mystery. It is always beyond us, yet totally around us, within us and outside of us, and we're all sharing in that same air and in that same breath. It is that one thing that you and I have done since the first moment we came out of our mother's womb; and there will come that moment when we will do it for the last time. But in between, you and I, are just doing it tonight and every night, taking in that universal air, exhaling that universal air, the one air, the only air, the totally accessible one, the totally given one, who never holds the God-self back but just waits to be received, waits to be taken in.

You are the wonderful people who have committed yourself, as John Main says, to the poverty of a single word (the poverty of a word that is hardly a word at all because it can't be spoken, it can only be experienced). So I thank you for the gift you are giving to our Church because I do believe, in the 35 years I have spoken to most of the major renewal movements in the churches, I do believe what you are saying is the most foundational, transformative naming of the problem and naming of the mystery of any renewal attempt I can imagine. Because you are moving beyond forms to substance, you are moving beyond any attachment to forms, infatuation with forms, defending of forms, proving of forms, and you go back to the poverty of a single word. How can anybody fight you? How can they call you a heretic? You make it too simple. You make it too clean. You make it too honest. You make it too truthful.

For years, we've quoted John's gospel where Jesus said 'the truth will set you free' (Jn 8:32) and we've all also learnt that that line might well be better translated, because when you think of truth you think of something philosophical and theological and out there. What I'd like to offer to you is that what you are already doing is recognising that honesty will set you free. That, I believe.

All this sometimes highfaluting search for truth! Where I see people come to truth, people are absolutely honest. Honest, just honest. I have met a lot of holy people in my life, and they are always honest about what is happening. No pretence, no thinking they are more than they are: 'I am who I am, who I am, who I am. I have met myself naked underneath my clothes, and that is enough.' That's what God loves. That's the self that you are going after. That's

the self you are really needing. You will never feel like enough. You will never feel like something great and glorious that you can prove to anybody else. But it is a place where you can rest. And it is a place where you can breathe. And it is a place where you can breathe free. And that is all that anybody really wants.

I thank you for offering it to our age, to our history, to our country and to our churches. Thank you.



5

Transformative Religion

I think it is important that we understand how we got into this position of religion largely as a belonging system and not a transformational system, religion largely that reflected and mirrored the local culture much more than providing an alternative to it.

E F Schumacher you know wrote *Small is Beautiful*. That's probably his better known book, but he wrote a lesser known book called *A Guide for the Perplexed*. He says that we have to begin precisely where the Hebrew people began. And the Jewish revelation begins with Torah, law, structure, identity, boundaries, certitude, order, authority and clarity. That is where the ego begins to structure itself and that is necessary. And where that leads most people to do in most cultures is to rely almost exclusively upon outer authority. Outer authority tells me what the truth is, tells me what to do, tells me what is right and what's wrong. It is a good place to start. In many ways, I think it is a necessary place to start. It's the parent-child relationship that you have to have some other people to tell you this is good, this works, this doesn't work, this will hurt you, this will not hurt you. And that is exactly what we see in Leviticus and Numbers, very strict laws down to minute detail.

My opinion is that most religions stay at stage one – just keep doing the task of law, structure, order, authority, certitude, clarity, over and over and over and over and over again. Certainly Catholicism is returning right back to it again because, in chaotic times, it does take away your anxiety. It works at a certain level. And if your concern is to take away anxiety, that is where you'll go. I look at the American Christian churches, in great part since 9/11, and it seems to me church has become one more place for frightened people to hide, that's all; one more place to give myself a quick fix of

surety, order, clarity, authority and certitude, so I don't have to enter into the mystical mess that reality has always been.

It begins with Torah, Leviticus and Numbers – the law. But then, there are equally large numbers of the Hebrew scriptures that we call Prophets. Without doubt, that segment of what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, has been the most ignored, the least quoted, the least influential because the prophet is always presenting an alternative perspective, but from the *inside*. It is precisely his mystical encounter that gives him the authority. He is not an ordained priest normally; he is not an establishment person. But what gives him the authority to critique is precisely his mystical encounter. And so what we see once we move to the prophetic level is the emergence of inner authority.

First, you have outer authority and almost exclusive reliance upon it. Then once you begin to know for yourself, once you have gone deep and have met the Holy One at some level, you find your reliance upon outer authority lessens. And you become rather dangerous at that stage. Because what most people do then is – not most people but many – completely switch their allegiance to inner authority. That's probably much of the rebellion of the 60s and the continuing chaos since that time. We call it postmodernism.

Most people are so angry and disillusioned and disappointed with where outer authority has led history and governments and peoples and groups and wars and churches, that we pull all of our authority inside of ourselves. But it's necessary or you don't interiorise the meaning of the law. 'You don't sift through it or sort it out', Schumacher says. We see Jesus teaching this very clearly, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount where there is an entire litany where he says 'the law says... I say...'; 'the law says... I say...'; 'the law says... I say'.

It is not just mouthing the law – that's just stage one – even though most religion prefers to stay there. Judaism did, Catholicism did, and of most Protestantism does. Why? Because the ego wants to stay there, and it is the same ego whether it is a Catholic ego or Protestant ego or Jewish ego. The issues never really change, and until that is somehow deconstructed, you are going to face the same

problems. I don't care what your theological explanations are and your doctrines and your dogmas are. Until the imperial ego is somehow undercut, it will have the last word and the first word and the word in between, for that matter too.

What I think Schumacher so wisely says is that what maturity does, what the Hebrew Scriptures do, is lead you to a third stage. So not just Torah where you overly rely upon outer authority; not just Prophets where you overly rely upon inner authority; but the wisdom literature where you have (already in the Hebrew scriptures like the book of Job, many of the Psalms, the book of Ecclesiastes, some of the Proverbs, some of the books of Sirach, and naturally appearing in scattered ways all through the scriptures) this struggling with paradox, this ability to hold together contradictions. It probably reaches its summit in the Book of Job.

That is the mature position where finally you have a person as it were doing a dance between inner authority and outer authority. That is where we are headed. That it seems to me the mature position. That is precisely Schumacher's *A Guide for the Perplexed*. And he says one's third task cannot be tackled until one has accomplished the first two. So if you just stay at stage one you are obviously nowhere ready for mystery, paradox, the collision of opposites that is the cross; you're really not capable of anything except dualistic either/or thinking.

He makes it very clear that the movement from stage one to stage two is experienced as a major dying. If you are not trained in dying (I don't know what other way to say it), if you are not trained in dying, you won't go. That is exactly why most institutional religion stays at stage one forever, because most people aren't trained in dying, in that 'dispossession' that John Main talks about.

We're into a capitalistic religion, a consumer religion of possession, of attainment, of accomplishment, of spiritual credits, spiritual merit badges; we even called them 'indulgences'. And we Catholics thought we could earn grace by sacramental performance. The performance principle always wriggles its way back in as long as the ego is in control because that is all the ego understands – performance. How am I doing? How am I doing? Always looking at

its own navel instead of delving and falling helplessly into the great mystery. Who wants to go there? It will always feel like dying.

There is no exception to that in any world religion. Any religion that tells you any differently – that it can all be a learning curve of upward success – is lying to you. That is not how transformation happens. And that's why we don't have transformative religion but largely religion as a belonging system, religion as a reward/punishment system, which of course, doesn't demand any real transformation.



6

Stage Three People

Francis MacNutt, the former Dominican who popularised the ministry of healing back in the 70s, sent me his latest book. His latest book is called *The Almost Perfect Crime*. And in this *Almost Perfect Crime*, he documents how, almost in the second century, certainly after 313, the church almost loses the very word 'healing'. It isn't even part of our vocabulary.

When he popularised it in the 70s, Catholics all thought: This must come from the Protestants or something; we don't talk about healing. We're not into healing. Even the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, we called it – Extreme Unction, *in extremis*, in the last ten minutes. Half the novels of Europe are about the priest entering the room, and this is the morbid moment – 'Oh God, here comes the priest; that means it is all over'.

We didn't come to heal people, to transform people. We didn't expect inner healing, emotional healing, relational healing, social healing or much less, physical healing. It was those evangelicals who were into faith healing; we are not into healing, no, not us! The 'almost perfect crime', especially in the light of the fact Jesus just did two things. He preached and healed, preached and healed, preached and healed, preached and healed; and the healing was always exemplifying what he just preached.

I am convinced that we preachers, if our word is not exercising some level of healing, I don't think it's the gospel. That's the most simple criterion of the preaching of the gospel I can imagine: It heals in the very hearing. And if there isn't much linkage between our religion and our politics, I think that's the reason – because we aren't really interested in the healing of the world, not even in the healing of ourselves. So how could we care about the social order? It wasn't to be healed; I wasn't to be healed. We aren't into healing;

we're in largely to imputing guilt – I don't know what other way to say it. It's the best way for us clergy to keep you all under control. It works; it is very effective, extremely effective – just make you feel ashamed or inferior. Don't send you down any roads where you will know for yourself the mercy of God, the grace of God, the goodness of God. We can't possibly let you know by any form of contemplation or meditation or then you won't be so co-dependent upon us, you see? And we've got to keep you dependent upon us – it's called job security, right?

Now remember, this was not done maliciously. The priests themselves are victims of it for the most part and the ministers. They didn't know any better because no one gave them a world community for Christian Meditation. No one taught them the great mystery of the inner life. It was largely Torah, long-structured outer authority; don't dare give people any inner authority because then the whole thing is reconfigured. But what I want to say is that what it moves you towards is stage three: wisdom, the ability to deal with paradox and mystery.

Much of the backtracking that is happening in institutional religion right now is that people got so scared (certainly our bishops and leadership did) that all it meant was stage two, that everybody would just stay at this critical level, critical consciousness where everything is critiquing, critiquing, critiquing, analysing. That is a necessary period. You see it so often in our sisters and women when they first read and understand, for example, the feminist analysis and they realise the evils of patriarchy and the evils of sexism. To be honest, sometimes for the next year they are not really easy to be around – at least, if you're a man – because the first insight is so overwhelming. And I am sure people of colour go through the same thing when they discover the character of racism.

The new discovery puts you in that necessary angry position of taking back your power, taking back your life, and everybody runs at that stage. And I think that is what the Church is doing. It didn't meet enough stage three people. I can only say that to groups like you because you have all the makings of being stage three people: not getting trapped, as my generation the 1960s liberals did, just

thinking the be all and the end all of enlightenment is prophetic criticism.

You just get tired of critique after a while. Critique and analysis is not salvation; it is not liberation; it is not spacious; it is not inviting; it is not lovely. You don't like to be critiqued every day and told you're wrong and stupid. It becomes another form of stage one because, now it's righteousness on the left instead of righteousness on the right. That's why everybody moves away from it.

Only if we can exemplify people who've gone through the first death and therefore practised dying, letting go of their false and pseudo certitudes, and then have passed through a second death which is probably even more difficult, the letting go of your need to critique, negate, analyse, point out the problems with everything. That is also ego-consciousness, another way to be right, another way to have power over people, and to think of yourself as enlightened because you are prophetic. That dying, it seems to me, is clearly a dying that we are led through by the grace of God and by, the confrontation with our own shadow, with our own unholiness, with our own brokenness. And as you learn to weep over those sins and to recognise that you also have everything that you hate and attack and accuse in other people, then it seems to me, you begin to live the great mystery of compassion, the great mystery of patience and understanding that I think I would call stage three.

So we have Torah, we have Prophets, we have Wisdom. What we're moving towards, I hope, is wisdom. And I think the reason Christianity became a separate religion was because our Jesus so beautifully symbolised that third stage – a man who could clearly deal with opposites and contradictions, and people outside of his belonging system. It was no way a reward/punishment system. But by the same token, that's by and large why much of Christianity has not understood Jesus. As we see, most of his teaching on non-violence, simplicity of life has had no strong effect on the entire history of Christianity except for those few, in every generation and every denomination, who do their inner work and meet Jesus at that deeper level.



7

Restorative Justice

What God does and reveals in the Scriptures is that God uses Israel's sin, God uses our mistakes, to bring us to transformation. We now call that restorative justice, which is the only meaning of biblical justice, not retributive justice which is based on vengeance – burn his ass for all eternity. Is that going to make things just right? Nine of out ten Christians still believe that: that God achieves God's justice by punishment, by punitiveness, by criminalisation of acts. And that is how we clergy got in the role of being the enforcers and the shamers and the guilt layers. Our job was to make you feel properly guilty about your mistakes, whereas what we see in the biblical pattern, if you connect the dots, God is always using people's mistakes in their favour to transform them.

Our capacity for missing the point is absolutely astounding, because the ego naturally understands tit for tat, reward/punishment: if you do it wrong, God hates you; if you do it right God rewards. It's a bad novel. And that's what we make the Bible into: a bad novel based on the only storyline we are really interested in, like an American Western – the good guys win and the bad guys lose. That is precisely what the Bible is *not* saying.

So God's power for justice is precisely God's power to restore the people when they are broken or hurt, and to use their mistakes to liberate them, to soften them, to enlighten them, to transform them. There is no text in the Old Testament where his justice is equated with vengeance on the sinner. It might look like it but if you read the whole paragraph, the whole thing, it is always to bring you back. To bring you back. His justice, God's justice, is always 'saving justice'; that's the very phrase that is used. What is experienced as punishment is always for the sake of restoration and not for vengeance. And therefore, the justice of the people is to participate

in this holiness and wholeness and spaciousness of God; to be brought into this same non-vengeful freedom; to move out of the tit for tat world of quid pro quo dualistic thinking. That's the work of prayer; that's the work of transformation.

And so the teaching very early becomes benevolence, generosity, magnanimity – always an imitation of God. Because God has been this way with us, we must move to this same position of magnanimity towards the stranger, towards the foreigner, towards the poor, towards the orphan, towards the widow. This is the first name of righteousness, very concrete. It is not a head trip, some kind of righteousness you attain by making a mental transaction that you call a 'personal decision for Jesus Christ' that no way affects your lifestyle, that no way affects how you live in this world. Simply a mental construct: I have made a personal decision for Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour.

You and I know that is the popular form of religion growing in America today. It's innocuous, it's harmless. It largely feeds the ego, gives you a sense of moral and spiritual superiority without doing anything, without changing anything. You mirror the larger culture in terms of greed, in terms of consumerism, in terms of ego, power, war. All the issues that Jesus was concerned about are of no interest at that level because the ego can't dare look at them. They would tell the ego to die. And that's the one thing of course it never wants to do.

Jesus participates then in this justice of his Father, his God, by deliberately being born into a poor family, a poor situation. He lives without property, nowhere to lay his head: 'Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Mt 8:20) He makes his opening line in his inaugural sermon: 'How happy are you who are poor.' (Mt 5:3) How did we get from that to the Cadillac faith we have today; To this prosperity gospel that is being taught in church after church, basically in all the religions of transaction – if you obey the laws and do it right, you will be rewarded in your purpose-driven life? Because it feels fair to people who have grown up on quid pro quo thinking.

Grace humiliates you, grace makes you feel powerless, grace makes you feel poor and empty and even useless. Who wants grace? Only sinners, only prostitutes, drunkards and tax collectors; not the proper people, not the nice people. That's why Jesus said that most outrageous line that I am still scandalised by: It is harder for a rich man to know what I am talking about than for 'a camel to pass through the eye of a needle' (Mt 19:24). Why did we not make that line ever a dogma or doctrine? He tells his followers to 'set your heart on his kingdom and his justice first and all these other things will be taken care of' (Mt 6:33). His disciples are called to share in this life and ministry of Jesus: 'None of you can be my disciples unless you give up all of your possessions.' (Lk 14:33) Wow!

So Jesus gives no abstract theological theory of social justice. He makes his life a concrete parable. He demands of his immediate followers a living witness to a simple life on the edge. Once you are in the middle, once you are at the top, you have too much to prove and too much to protect. He wanted his followers to be free from the world and its seductions, or they would have no inner authority.



8

The Central Problem of Hate

The longer we live in this world, we're forced to ask the question, 'What makes so many people so mean? What creates mean-spirited people – 'I want to hurt you'? What is behind that hate and what I just called mean-spiritedness? Maybe that's really what we see more often than sort of overt hatred.

Mean-spiritedness is, unfortunately it seems, here so stay. Hate is for some reason healthful. Hate works in a lot of immediate and seemingly good ways. It unites a group very quickly, far quicker than love, you must know that. It unites the disparate parts of your own ego very quickly. The ego is formed by contraction, by againstness; while the soul is formed by expansion. Expansion doesn't come easily because you've got to let down your boundaries and no one wants to do that. Contraction – whereby you can eliminate another person, write them off, exclude them, torture them, expel them – immediately gives you a sense of bounded definition, bounded superiority. Hatred, mean-spiritedness, gives a person identity even if it's a negative one. We'd sooner have a negative identity than be nothing, empty – just who we are in God. Hatred takes away all doubts and free-floating anxiety, even if in a false way. It feels superior and feels in control.

Hate settles the dust and the ambiguity that none of us likes. Hate is much more common and is, I'm sad to have to say it as a priest, but I think it is much more immediately effective than love. Immediately. Hate makes the world go round. Just read the morning paper of any country, read the first page of any paper; it is largely who is hating who.

You could say that Jesus came to resolve the central and essential problem of hate. There is really no other way to save us from ourselves, to save us from one another, and to therefore, save

us, unless and until we are saved from our need to hate. That's why people even make religion into a cover for their need to be hateful: I am hating for Jesus, so it is okay; I am hating for the United States so my hatred is good hatred. This happens every day; it's almost the name of the game. The ultimate disguise whereby you can remain a hateful, mean-spirited person is to do it to protect the church, or to protect the country – all those good excuses. So you are relieved of all anxiety – I am still a holy person – even though underneath, in the deeper stream, you are a hateful person. But you don't have to see that. It's what Scott Peck called it years ago, 'People of the Lie'.

We have done so much Utopian talk about Jesus and love but Jesus had a very hard time getting to the issue of 'love'. First, He had to expose and destroy the phenomenon of hate, which I think is the meaning of the cross. Once you expose the lie and the illusion of hatred, love could show itself clearly. But until then, it can't. The pattern is still the same, as Jesus shockingly put it, 'Satan is the real prince of this world' (John 12:31). Hate, it seems, is the ordinary daily agenda; love is the totally enlightened, entirely nonsensical way out of the ordinary agenda. The gospel presents the dilemma in a personal and cathartic narrative that grounds the whole issue in history and in one man's enlightened response to that history. One man, Jesus, accepts the religious and social judgement of hate. We have both church and state, both Pilate and Caiphas, both power systems declaring him unworthy, declaring him a sinner, wrong, the problem. The very one, that you and I call the most perfect man who ever lived, is judged by power at the highest levels to in fact be the problem. But he bears the consequences of hatred publicly but in an utterly new way that transforms the pattern and therefore, for us, transforms the possibilities.

For two thousand years, he has remained the most striking icon of a possible new agenda. His death exposed the lie and the problem like never before. His risen life told people that life could have a different storyline. He did not just only give us textbook answers from a distance but personally walked through the process of being rejected and then said 'follow me' – something you only know having been in that position.

To speak specifically to our question, 'What is behind hate?' I believe that fear is almost always behind it. The people who don't have much self-knowledge, who don't go quietly with the poverty of a single word: they never get to that deeper river of fear to even know that it is there, even recognise these subtle fears: afraid of not looking good, afraid of not being in control, afraid of not having the right word. All those are fears, but they're subtle. You've got to learn to see them by going right into your poverty. Sometimes it looks like it's control that is behind hatred, but even control freaks are usually afraid of losing something. Just go deeper and you'll see. It is almost always fear that justifies our knee-jerk hateful response, a fear that is hardly ever recognised as such. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, the angels of darkness must always disguise themselves as angels of light. The best and most convincing disguise, of course, is virtue itself or godliness. Then it never looks like fear, as I said before.

For fear to survive, it has to look like reason or reasonableness, prudence, common sense, intelligence, the need for social order, morality, religion, obedience or even justice and spirituality. It always works. Just give it the nice cover and you don't have to face that underneath it is craven fear. What better way to veil vengeance and a vengeful spirit than to call it justice. You hear it on the news every night: 'I just want justice.' And one wonders if the inner need to punish the other, to hurt the other, has ever been faced or ever been recognised.

Brothers and sisters, let's be honest, it's in every one of us in this room. When someone has made you afraid, you want to hurt them back. And that demon is not exorcised easily. Until you name the demon and admit the demon is there, you have no power in exorcising the demon. That's clear in Jesus' exorcisms. You must name the demon correctly. Now when you pretend the demon isn't there, you'll never do any good exorcism. And that's largely what we do - it's called it denial.

What better way to cover greed than to call it responsible stewardship? Only people who have moved beyond ego and the controlling of all outcomes, only those practised in 'letting go', which is what you are doing every morning and every evening for at

least twenty minutes - 'letting go', 'letting go'. You should be the experts at 'letting go', you are making an art form out of it. In fact if you are not learning to let go but you're still wrapped round your opinions, I know you're not meditating. You are just giving yourself a name and calling yourself a meditator.

To be trapped inside of your own small ego, small self - what we call your false self - is always to be afraid. It is necessary to be afraid; no wonder fear is the name of the game in almost all of the world. To not have anyone you can trust is necessarily to be a control freak. Why wouldn't you? You have to be.

Those great religions try their best to free individuals from the tyranny of their small and fragile selves. It always points to a larger identity: the God self, the Christ self, the Buddha self, the true self, the only self, 'hidden with Christ in God' as Colossians would say (Col 3:3). The only trustworthy lover, the only trustworthy self.

Healthy and true religion, like Jesus himself, tells you that there is Someone you can trust. You do not have to create all the patterns and you do not have to fix all of the patterns. You do not have to explain all of the failures. You know you are simply in the stream that we call the mystery of death and resurrection - the Paschal mystery. What else would be the beginning of peace? As long as you think you've got to fix everything and control everything and explain everything and understand everything, I can promise you, you will never be a peaceful person.



*It is important that
we understand
religion not as a
belonging system,
but a radical
transformational
system.*



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Fr Richard Rohr emphasises that true religion should transform the individual and society and not foster a system of belonging and of superiority. Meditation, he says, is transformative because it strips away the egoistic self and the attachment to doctrine and forms. This spiritual practice can help society to move from law to wisdom, from retributive justice to restorative justice, and from hate to forgiveness.



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