

Reflections on Richard Rohr. 9 November 2007, Pharmacy College Melbourne

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest who runs the 'Centre for Contemplation and Action' in Albuquerque New Mexico spoke on Thursday night to about 500 people at Pharmacy College in Melbourne. On a speaking tour of Australia and New Zealand sponsored by John Garratt Bookstore, his itinerary also included a Men's retreat (Nov 10-13) in Victoria which was sold out before he left home.

Richard is a gifted speaker who has some profoundly simple things to share with his audience. He began by talking about what he calls the dualistic mind of the West. That for most of us, life at any moment comes down to making decisions, 'Is this right or wrong?', 'Is it good or bad?' 'Is it black or white?' He makes the point that our whole political system is based on one side trying to convince the other side that they are right and thinking if they say it often enough and loud enough that it will happen, but as we know it doesn't. Each side is so convinced that they are right that there is no room for compromise or apologies or concessions. This way of thinking isn't bad and in fact it is has served us very well as children and students, unfortunately it doesn't bring us closer to God. Our mind is so full of decisions and babble that there is no room to hear God. He invites us to another way of thinking and being that is much more inclusive. He can hold two tensions at the same time.

Richard introduced a contemplative exercise where after settling yourself you imagine you are sitting in front of a stream that represents your conscience. As you sit there thoughts will come to you, and you imagine putting them on a boat and sending them down the stream. Thought after thought doesn't get judged just put on a boat and let go. The ones that recur over and over are often our addictions, whether they be thoughts of judgment or inferiority, just let them go. He says it is vital that we get to know ourselves apart from these thoughts. After a while of practicing this, we will begin to be able to hear God's words for us.

The other simple yet profound thing Richard reminded us was that there is nothing we can do that will make God love us more. As I reflected upon this, I thought how do we as Christians forget this? How do we strive to be more worthy and think God's love is based on what we do, our successes and our wins rather than the knowledge that we loved for who we are? I found thing a rather affirming thing to remind myself of!

Richard spoke about his centre which aims to educate people particularly those working in the areas of social justice about the way of contemplation. He said when he began the centre he imagined he would teach contemplation about 50% of the time and action 50% but now he teaches contemplation at least 80% of the time. He said unless we come to social justice work with a more inclusive way of thinking we will burnout and become bitter. If we go into this work expecting successes (of which there aren't too many) we wont survive very long.

The final thing Richard shared with us was a story from a recent science and faith convention that is held in New Mexico every year. He was talking to an eminent Jewish scientist and they began to talk about the commandment about taking the Lord's name in vain. He said that Christians had become convinced that it means not saying "God dammit" He said that for the Jewish people it meant not saying God or Yahweh's name at all because as soon as you utter the name you have put Him/her into our understanding. He continued with this, that the original pronunciation of Yahweh did so with virtually no movement of the tongue or lips with 'Yah' as almost an intake of breath and 'weh' as an exhalation of breath so the name when said like this become about as close as you can get to breathing and God revealing himself/herself as breath.

Richard has written a large number of books and his latest book is called *The Naked Now* (Crossroad Publishing 2009).

– Kristen Hobby