

## *January Book Summary*

By: Dan Brent

### *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*

Richard Rohr, Crossroad, 2009, 187 pp., \$19.95

Jesus found God in disorder and imperfection. We would do well to look for him there also. That's the theme of Rohr's book. "The path ahead will always be a necessary mixture of darkness and light." (p.22) "God becomes someone dancing with you and you are not afraid of making mistakes." (p.23)

There are, Rohr explains, three ways of seeing. One is with our eyes and the details they pick up. Another is with our imagination and reason, building on what our eyes capture. The third, the all-knowing eye of understanding, allows us to stand in awe in the presence of something. It is variously called conversion, enlightenment, transformation, or holiness. This is how the mystics see.

Rohr is very critical of the "either-or" that characterizes most of our interactions. There are always, it seems, two roads, two perceptions, two truths – mine and yours. Mine is right; yours is wrong. My objective is to persuade you and thus win! But this "binary thinking is completely inadequate for the major questions and dilemmas of life." (p.32)

Much better is what the book calls contemplation. "Contemplation is an exercise in keeping your heart and mind spaces open long enough for the mind to see other hidden material." (p.34)

"Wondering" is a name for this kind of thinking. But over the centuries, theological discourse has moved to replacing it with "answering". You either had the "right" (orthodox) response or you were punished as a heretic. The emphasis shifted from Jesus to correct information and it was binary: you were right or wrong. No! Rather "Let yourself wonder," Rohr counsels.

Religious fundamentalists have traded focus on God to "a love affair with words and ideas *about* God." (p.50) "Such forms of religion end up obsessed with purity codes rather than compassion, justice, and a clean heart." (p.52) Peace, silence, stillness are God's primary language.

"All the information in the world does not of itself accumulate into wisdom." (p.59) Wisdom comes from seeing. And wisdom is *midwifed* by the experiences of both great love and great suffering.

Christianity is supposed to be a both-and (not an either-or) religion. In the incarnation, the Son of God became a man – both divine and human. Jesus prayed in silence and solitude. God expects us to live God's divine life. But – shame on us – our "Prayer

conducted primarily in public becomes a matter of making announcements to God.” (p.73) Our true task in prayer should be just to return God’s gaze.

Many of Jesus’ sayings were enigmatic and confusing. (“Many are called but few are chosen.”) But his followers “claim to have total and complete truth.” (p.85) That’s ironic since now scientists (whom we see as fact-focused) see their theories as only hypotheses. In fact, even corporations methodically solicit and reward self-criticism. But churches punish those who challenge their orthodoxy. In reality, Rohr says, “remain sincerely open to the ongoing challenges of life and love and you will find God – and also yourself.” (p.96)

The kingdom of God, Rohr says, is the “naked now” – the present world but without the boundaries of race, nationalities, anything that makes one of us think he or she is better or worse than someone else. “Unmediated contact with the moment is the clearest path to divine union.” (p.105)

“We must move from a belief-based religion to a practice-based religion or little will change.” (p.108) Rohr is advocating a more open-minded approach to God whom we can expect to meet in the realities of the *now* life. Symptoms of that progress include the ability to deal with darkness and failure as well as a pervasive joy. “I stop labeling, ranking, and categorizing people and things and just *see* them.” (p.137)

“The enormous breakthrough is that when you honor and accept the divine image within yourself, you cannot help but see it in everybody else too.” (p.159)

The book finishes with several appendices one of which is a “how-to” for practicing awareness. Focus your senses on some object, it says. Do not judge it; just savor it. Let it speak to you and let the contented silence just happen.