

FOREWORD TO THE IOTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

By Anne Lamott

I converted to Christianity in 1985 at a tiny progressive sanctuary church in Marin City, California, despite having been raised by highly intellectual atheists. I got clean and sober in 1986. So, there was a gap year, where I came to church sick and probably smelly, longing for knowledge of this higher power my pastor preached about, some sort of loving energy that animated all of life, surrounding, co-creating, indwelling-the Love who had worn sandals.

My pastor frequently quoted Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the radical treatise on how to develop and nurture a deeply contemplative and mystical way of life. For that last year of active alcoholism, I had Merton as my companion. He helped bring me to Jesus, to the risen Christ, and, by some mysterious spiritual Rube Goldberg machination, this led me to Richard Rohr.

The first Rohr book I read was *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go*, which I knew by then was the Third Step in my Twelve Step Recovery Program. Letting go! Ugh. Not my strong suit. I've heard Twelve Steppers say that everything we let go of has claw marks on it, and yet practicing letting go really does make doing so somewhat more possible. Let go, or get dragged, right? So, Rohr's beautiful meditation and exhortation was my Bible, his voice always so wise and genial, never dogmatic or preachy-and so real.

Ever since, so many of his books and writings have hit the spot in my deepest inside places, at my hungriest for spiritual truth and the kindness that is Richard Rohr's stock in trade. I have read *Wondrous Encounters: Scriptures for Lent* every year since 2011. Here's an excerpt:

There are two moments that matter. One is when you know that your one and only life is absolutely valuable and alive. The other is when you know your life, as presently lived, is entirely pointless and empty. You need both of them to keep you going in the right direction. Lent is about both. The first such moment gives you energy and joy by connecting you with your ultimate Source and Ground. The second gives you limits and boundaries, and a proper humility, so you keep seeking the Source and Ground and not just your small self.

That is all I ever need to remember on any given day, the ultimate condensation of the first three steps, or the Three Step Waltz, as we call it: I can't; God can; I think I'll let God. I am powerless over people, places, and things, unable to save or fix or rescue anyone, including myself. But God can, through the movement of grace in our lives: grace as beloved community, grace as spiritual WD-40. So maybe, because of the Gift of Desperation, I'll let God. It was God as the Gift of Desperation that ultimately got me sober. Later, Good Orderly Direction helped guide me-and just yesterday, Grace Over Drama helped me once again release my grown, clean, and sober son to his own hero's journey. (Thank you, Jesus.)

I could have just kept reading Rohr's book over and over for all my needs and questions to be met. And yet, later that year, the masterpiece you hold in your hands was published.

Breathing Under Water was a merge, a marriage of the Twelve Steps and the Gospel message: a gift to all who are broken, addicted, and scared. He writes, "Stinking thinking' is the universal addiction." This is one of the most stunning, succinct, and profound sentences I've ever read. And this is indeed a book for anyone and everyone who cannot stop creating trances and numbness via alcohol, drugs, sex, workaholism, or toxic, obsessive thinking. (I once took the Alcoholic's 20 Questions on Drinking, only I substituted Thinking: Has thinking ever damaged your primary relationships? Has thinking ever interfered with your work life? Do you ever think alone? I got all twenty right. I was clearly a thinkaholic.) Rohr writes:

We are all spiritually powerless, however,
not just those who are physically addicted to a substance,
which is why I address this book to everyone.
Alcoholics just have their powerlessness visible for all to see.
The rest of us disguise it in different ways, and overcompensate
for our more hidden and subtle addictions and attachments,
especially our addiction to our way of thinking.

Over the years, I've read many of Rohr's articles and papers on peace and justice, evolutionary love, radical self-love, suffering and new life, eco-spirituality, and absolute inclusivity, all bathed in our union with the Cosmic Christ, God's astonishing maternal love for the world. But I always return to *Breathing Under Water*, where the Gospel meets the Twelve Steps through the heart and words of this incredibly sweet Franciscan. Rohr shows the reader that the Twelve Step Program "parallels, mirrors, and makes practical the same messages that Jesus gave us." Here is the union of the two:

We suffer to get well.
We surrender to win.
We die to live.
We give it away to keep it.

The title, *Breathing Under Water*, comes from a poem about overwhelm and surrender by Carol Bialock, the last lines of which read,

I knew, then, there was neither flight nor death nor drowning.
That when the sea comes calling you stop being good neighbors.
Well-acquainted, neighbors. friendly-from-a-distance
And you give your house for a coral castle,
and you learn to breathe underwater.

As a Twelve Stepper who has known degradation, hopelessness, self-loathing, and resurrection, who has given her house for a coral castle most days and who has learned to breathe underwater, one day at a time, occasionally gulping, gasping, and spluttering, I've learned that the secret to life and serenity begins with the Third Step, where we make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we each understand God. The care of God! The care of God, rather than the voice of addiction, the super-ego, the Enemy? How? I recommend you read this book with a highlighter pen beside you. You will underline something in every chapter, about powerlessness, the raging ego, hope, surrender, salvation, setbacks, grace, making amends, and opening our hearts to bright cooling ribbons of Cosmic and earthly love--the very reason we are here.

If you or a loved one have suffered or are suffering the slavery and humiliation of addiction, this book is a blue-print for freedom and new life, a path with a little light to see by-the coral castle. As we read in the AA Big Book, words that Richard Rohr might easily have written,

Abandon yourself to God as you understand God.

Admit your faults to [God] and to your fellows.

Clear away the wreckage of your past.

Give freely of what you find and join us.

We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit,

and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny

May God bless you and keep you-until then.

As we often tell newcomers at our meetings, give it a try-and if, after a month or so, you are not feeling happier and more peaceful, we will gladly refund your misery. And if you do give the path described in this book a try, buckle up, because Brother Rohr may just take you to places you've both avoided and longed for, to truth, union, joy, laughter, and, greatest of all, to your own precious self, here on earth with us, child of God.

-Anne Lamott