

Vanity

The behaviors of vanity – whether manipulating one’s appearance, or wasting one’s time – come and go in all of us. Hopefully, as we move through life, our senses of perspective and priority develop graciously, leading us away from our vanities, toward our blessings. But it is a struggle. Three steps forward, two steps back.

I had the delight and privilege of hearing one of the world’s great prophetic preachers every day of a weeklong session last month. Richard Rohr’s thought and writing often explore today’s scriptural themes: Eschewing Vanity (Ecclesiastes), Growing up and Getting Past Ambition (Luke’s Gospel), and the Universality of Christ (the letter to the Colossians). So what follows are thoughts heavily influenced by the imagery Rohr paints.

From the work of Ken Wilber and other psychologists, a useful and informative model for the stages of life has emerged. In Stage 1, we develop an ego – we need praise and accomplishment and a sense of our self as the center of things to thrive. In stage 2, we learn to get along with (or over on) other people. We realize that our relationships determine our place in the world, and that they can be nurtured or manipulated. But we are still working on our own agenda, still identifying ourselves primarily based on the ego we have developed, the accomplishments we have made, and the satisfaction we get from our relationships, our power and our stuff.

Many, perhaps most of us only get this far. Individuals, family systems, even nations never grow up. When the realities of existence are thrust upon us, we react the way Ecclesiastes

does, complaining: “The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness; yet the same fate befalls them both; what makes me think I’m so very wise? I begin to hate life, for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hate all my toil under the sun, seeing as I must leave it to those who come after me —and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?”

In the second half of life, in Stage 3, if we reach it, we wake up. We begin to understand the truths Ecclesiastes points out and resent them less. We begin to understand the unity of the universe – if we are Christians, the cosmic nature of Christ as God -- we come to know that distinctions among us are a false construct predicated on survival of the fittest. That there is neither Jew nor Gentile, etc. etc. as in the Epistle. We contemplate our lives and our surroundings and our beliefs and see – for the first time -- what our priorities should really be. We are given the opportunity to let go of our self-importance and blend with the rest of Creation. Maybe even help out a bit.

For it is in Stage 4 ‘Showing up’ that the implications of Stage 3’s awakening play out. This is what Jesus is talking about when he tells the man, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. What if this very night your life is demanded of you. The things you have, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Rohr points out: “We know psychologists have made a common observation on the direction taken by a mature person: In the second half of life, if you grow up without major dysfunction, major violence, major disillusionment, you will continually become less violent, more inclusive, less dualistic (black and white thinking), and more compassionate.”

Or, as Carl Jung put it: “One cannot live the afternoon of life according to life’s morning, for what was great in the morning will be of little use in the evening. And, what, in the morning was true, will at evening have actually become a lie.” A vanity. “In stages 3 and 4, we deconstruct what was assembled in 1 and 2, the first half, because those two do not tend to lead one to love. The problem is that many of us struggle with these last two steps because we don’t want to let go of any aspect of the identity we have striven so hard to make.”

“The thing that most keeps us back from this, the ‘further journey,’” says Rohr, “that keeps us from *Falling Upward* (the title of one of his books), is that we have spent so much of our time and effort investing in the first journey, we’re not about to let go of any of it: our occupation, our persona, our self-image, our stuff. The better it is, the more admired it is, the harder it is to let go of.”

One of the realizations we come to and contemplate, and which makes our project of letting go and showing up easier is basic to Christian theology, but scarcely contemplated by most of us: the universality of Christ in God. In seeking to make sense of the Bible, people have termed it poetry, and also insisted that it is a series of literal descriptions. But literalism is the least powerful of any story’s meanings. The greatest strength of the text is in its symbolism, which must acknowledge all the conflicting elements of its subject.

When the Pauline writer tells the Colossians, “Christ is all in all,” he doesn’t mean ‘all of us.’ Rohr’s image is that in Jesus, “...the blueprint became visible. It did not begin even a few

million years ago with Earth, let alone 350,000 years ago with homo sapiens, or 7000 years ago either, the way some insist. It began 13.6 billion years ago with Creation. If we want to have coherent conversations with children who have grown up with the Hubble telescope, we must acknowledge this very thing. They will not be interested in (let alone satisfied by) a God who is not at least as big as the universe. We grew up believing (think Carl Sagan) there were billions of stars in the universe. Now the scientists know there are six galaxies for every human being on Earth." Jesus became the Christ, sure, but everything created was already there. That's what "In the beginning was the Word" means.

"You don't even have to be Christian to understand such a universal Christ. Jesus is like the shortcut on the computer: he helps you get there faster and see the divine presence in everything, all 13.6 billion years of it." In the discovery of truth, Christ is all and in all. All in all. No distinction based on anything except the content of one's character. That is the Kingdom of God.

"The Church fathers wrote about the 'great chain of being,'" observes Rohr. "The chain began with finding the divine in the Earth, the firmament, then in plants, trees, animals, then humans, then angels, then the divinity. Notice that humans are only one link in the chain. Once the chain is broken, we stop honoring the divine presence in any of the other links. The link has been broken in humans; we think we are more important than the rest of Creation.

But for our children and grandchildren, this distinction cannot work. For them, either all is sacred, or nothing is. Christians should be the first in line to recognize the divine DNA in everything."

Meister Eckhardt said, "Every creature is the Word of God; and is a book about God." It also means when people are terrorized in Gilroy or El Paso or Syria, we can no longer think of 'them,' it is we who must suffer with them and must act on their behalf – if we are mature enough to do so.

What does it mean to set our minds on things that are above? What does it mean to grow up and show up and live into the incomprehensible glory that is a life of integrity? The mystic Diana Hayes writes: "This is our calling as the Christian faithful: to recognize the Christ in everyone. And to reach out a hand of hope, to speak a word of love, to sing a song of happiness, to share a tear of joy or pain, to speak a word of praise, to murmur a prayer, to stand together against those forces that would divide us, isolate us, and block our flow toward home."

"You have died..." says the letter. That death is a symbol: the sacrament of baptism, a symbol for acceptance of the verities of existence, a symbol for submission to the reality of God's presence in every atom of Creation, including us, and a symbol for the conviction that our great purpose is to be of service. "You have died, and your life is hidden in Christ." It's hidden because it hasn't happened yet. Jesus asks, 'Who am I to judge -- ie: predict -- your life, your inheritance, your faith journey? That is yours to do. As soon as you get fully acquainted with the concept of mercy and compassion, as soon as you grow up and show up, then you will see God and you will know yourself, and your life will be revealed accordingly.

It's not as if God grew to despise the rest of Creation, and only became pleased when the dust came to life. No, all of it was good; all of it is good, very good. Humanity is an experiment.

With those lists of vices, nobody is telling us, 'Don't love anybody too much, stifle your every questionable thought, don't get too excited about anything, especially creativity, don't worry about looking good, don't ever acquire anything.' Who would listen? No. No. No. All that's what those first two stages are for. What the wisest of the elders are saying to us is, 'Yes, do it. do all these things... while you're young. Then, grow up: Cut them out. Wake up: Realize what's truly valuable. And Show up: Share whatever you have with whomever can use it for good.'

"The wrath of God is coming upon the disobedient," says the scripture – and Jesus clarifies the order that's being talked about here, it's "Feed my lambs." Whoever is disobedient to that, loses out. They will not, they do not, they cannot have abundant life.

But if you can move on, mature, show up, embrace what really matters, be part of 'the solution,' then you will have all there is.