

BREATHING UNDER WATER



RICHARD ROHR



**BREATHING  
UNDER WATER**

Spirituality  
and the  
Twelve Steps



Originally published in the United States of America in 2011  
by Franciscan Media, Cincinnati, Ohio

First published in Great Britain in 2016

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST  
www.spck.org.uk

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-07512-6  
eBook ISBN 978-0-281-07513-3

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press  
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

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DEDICATION

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*This book is written for you.*



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“I did not come for the healthy, but for those who need a doctor.”

—*Jesus (Luke 5:31–32)*

“You see, Alcohol in Latin is ‘spiritus’ and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison.”

—*Carl Jung’s letter to Bill Wilson in 1961,  
shortly before Jung’s death*

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————— INTRODUCTION —————  
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“These are the only genuine ideas, the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce.”<sup>1</sup>

— *Jose Ortega y Gasset*



Almost twenty-five years ago, I gave a set of talks in Cincinnati to link the wisdom of the Twelve Step Program with what St. Francis called “the marrow of the Gospel.”<sup>2</sup> I was amazed how obvious and easy a task it was, and was surprised this was not equally obvious to everybody involved in either of these fields. So the least I can hope to do here is to make what seems obvious a bit more obvious.

“Twelve Steppers” sometimes thought they had left the church for the Wednesday night meetings in the basement; and many upstairs in the sanctuary presumed that their “higher” concerns were something different from “those people with problems” down below. The similar messages between the two teachings assure me that we are dealing with a common inspiration from the Holy Spirit and from the same collective unconscious. In fact, I am still convinced that on the practical (read “transformational”) level, the Gospel message of Jesus and the Twelve Step message of Bill Wilson are largely the same message, even in some detail, as I will try to show in this book. (I will frequently quote Bill W as the assigned author of the Twelve Steps and the so-called *Big Book*

of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I am aware there is some doubt as to who exactly wrote what.)

My original lectures were called “Breathing Under Water,” a title taken from a telling poem by Carol Bieleck, R.S.C.J., which seemed to sum up so much of the common message. I quote it here in full:

“Breathing Under Water”

I built my house by the sea.  
Not on the sands, mind you;  
not on the shifting sand.  
And I built it of rock.  
A strong house  
by a strong sea.  
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.  
Good neighbors.  
Not that we spoke much.  
We met in silences.  
Respectful, keeping our distance,  
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.  
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,  
always, the sand between.  
  
And then one day,  
—and I still don’t know how it happened—  
the sea came.  
Without warning.  
  
Without welcome, even

Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand  
 like wine,  
 less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.  
 Slow, but coming.  
 Slow, but flowing like an open wound.  
 And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning  
 and I thought of death.  
 And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it  
 reached my door.  
 And I knew then, there was neither flight, nor death,  
 nor drowning.  
 That when the sea comes calling you stop being  
 neighbors  
 Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance, neighbors  
 And you give your house for a coral castle,  
 And you learn to breathe underwater.<sup>3</sup>

The original cassette recordings continued to move over the years, eventually became CDs, and morphed into a second set of talks called “How Do We Breathe Under Water?” done over fifteen years later. People continued to encourage me to put some of these ideas into written form. So, with some added growth and experience, here is my attempt. I hope it can offer all of us *some underwater breathing lessons*—for a culture, and a church, that often appears to be drowning without knowing it. But do not despair. What Ortega y Gasset calls the state of mind of the “shipwrecked” is perhaps a necessary beginning point for any salvation from such drowning.

*Connecting the Gospel and the Twelve Steps*

Although in this book I will first look at the trapped individual, I will also try to point out the very similar parallels in institutions, cultures, and nations. As organizational consultant and psychotherapist Anne Wilson Schaef said many years ago, our society itself shows all the signs of classic addiction. I began to wonder whether addiction could be one very helpful metaphor for what the biblical tradition called “sin.”

I personally am convinced that is the case, which might be the first foundational connection between the Gospel and the Twelve Step Program. How helpful it is to see sin, like addiction, as a *disease*, a very destructive disease, instead of merely something that was culpable, punishable, or “made God unhappy.” If sin indeed made God unhappy, it was because *God desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of our disease*. The healing ministry of Jesus should have made that crystal clear; healing was about all that he did, with much of his teaching illustrating the healings—and vice versa. It is rather amazing that this did not remain at the top of all church agendas.

As Carol Bieleck says in her poem, we cannot stop the drowning waters of our addictive culture from rising, but we must at least see our reality for what it is, seek to properly detach from it, and build a coral castle and learn to breathe under water. The New Testament called it salvation or enlightenment, the Twelve Step Program called it recovery. The trouble is that most Christians pushed this great liberation off into the next world, and many Twelve Steppers settled for

mere sobriety from a substance instead of a real transformation of the self. We have all been the losers, as a result—waiting around for “enlightenment at gunpoint” (death) instead of enjoying God’s banquet much earlier in life.

The Twelve Step Program parallels, mirrors, and makes practical the same messages that Jesus gave us, but now without as much danger of spiritualizing the message and pushing its effects into a future and metaphysical world. By the fourth century Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, which left us needing to *agree* on its transcendent truth claims (for example, Jesus is God, God is Trinity, Mary was a virgin, etc.), instead of experiencing the very practical “steps” of human enlightenment, the central message of our own transformation into “the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), and bringing about a “new creation” on this earth (Galatians 6:15). It became theory over practice.

We henceforth concentrated on how to worship Jesus as one united empire instead of following Jesus in any practical ways (even though he never once said “worship me” but often said “follow me”). The emperors, not popes or bishops, convened the next few councils of the church, and their concerns were usually not the healing of the masses but a united empire; and surely not Jesus’ clear teaching on nonviolence, simplicity of lifestyle, and healing those on the edge, which would have derailed the urgent concerns of an empire, as we see to this day.

Our Christian preoccupation with *metaphysics and the future* became the avoiding of *the “physics” itself and the present*.

Endless theorizing, and the taking of sides, opinions about which we could be right or wrong, trumped and toppled the universally available gift of the Divine Indwelling, the real “incarnation” which still has the power to change the world.

As Tertullian, sometimes called the first Western theologian (AD 166–225), said, “*Caro salutis cardo*,”<sup>4</sup> *the flesh* is the hinge on which salvation swings and the axis on which it hangs. When Christianity loses its material/physical/earthly interests, it has very little to say about how God actually loves the world into wholeness. In endless arguing about Spirit, we too often avoided both body and soul. Now we suffer the consequences of a bodily addicted and too often soulless society, while still arguing the abstractions of theology and liturgy, and paying out an always available Holy Spirit to the very few who meet all the requirements.

### ***Going Toward the Pain***

There is no side to take in the Twelve Step Program! It is not a worthiness contest. *There is only an absolutely necessary starting point! The experience of “powerlessness” is where we all must begin.* And Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is honest and humble enough to state this, just as Jesus himself always went *where the pain was*. Wherever there was human suffering, Jesus was concerned about it *now, and about its healing now*. It is rather amazing and very sad that we pushed it all off into a future reward system for those who were “worthy.” As if any of us are.

Is it this human pain that we are afraid of? Powerlessness, the state of the shipwrecked, is an experience we all share anyway, if we are sincere, but Bill Wilson found we are not very good at that either. He called it “denial.” It seems we are not that free to be honest, or even aware, because most of our garbage is buried in the unconscious. So it is absolutely essential that we find a spirituality that reaches to that hidden level. If not, nothing really changes.

It is not necessarily bad will or even conscious denial on our part. We just can't see what we are not forced to see. As Jesus put it, we “see the splinter in our brother's or sister's eye and miss the log in our own” (Matthew 7:4–5). The whole deceptive game is revealed in that one brilliant line from Jesus. But we seem to need something to force us to deal with that log. For many, if not most, people the only thing strong enough to force them is some experience of addiction, some moral failure, or some falling over which they are powerless.<sup>5</sup>

We are all spiritually powerless, however, and not just those 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*.

We all take our own pattern of thinking as normative, logical, and surely true, even when it does not fully compute. We keep doing the same thing over and over again, even if it is

not working for us. That is the self-destructive, even “demonic,” nature of all addiction and of the mind, in particular. *We think we are our thinking, and we even take that thinking as utterly “true,” which removes us at least two steps from reality itself.* We really are our own worst enemies, and salvation is primarily from ourselves. It seems humans would sooner die than change or admit that they are mistaken.

This thinking mind, with a certain tit-for-tat rationality, made the Gospel itself into an achievement contest in which “the one with the most willpower wins,” even though almost everybody actually loses by the normal criteria. That is how far *the ego* (read “false self” or Paul’s word “the flesh”) will go to promote and protect itself. It would sooner die than change or admit that it is mistaken. It would sooner live in a win/lose world in which most lose than allow God any win-win victory. Grace is always a humiliation for the ego, it seems.

At that level, organized religion is no longer good news for most people, but bad news indeed. It set us up for the massive atheism, agnosticism, hedonism, and secularism we now see in almost all formerly Christian countries (and in those who just keep up the externals). I now have more people tell me they are “recovering Catholics” than those in recovery from addiction. I am told that for every person that is joining the church, three are leaving. Are these all bad or insincere people? I don’t think so. Perhaps we failed to give them the good news they desired, needed, and expected?

