

## CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR RICHARD ROHR

### *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*

Franciscan priest and prolific author Rohr is a perfect writer on the subject of the 12 Steps. He understands how radical a change they bring about, and that the 12 Step program is preeminently spiritual. His easy-to-read book is essentially a commentary on each of the steps, with twelve chapters and a postscript that concisely tackles the big religious question of human suffering, suffering with which addicts and their families are intimately acquainted. Jesus, Rohr answers, is no stranger to suffering.... This is a good book for those in recovery from addiction and those who love them.

—*Publishers Weekly*

### *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*

In *Eager to Love*, [Rohr] reclaims the mysticism inherent in the Franciscan legacy and he offers it as an alternative to the hierarchical, patriarchal and authoritarian Christianity that he suggests has primary responsibility for so much of contemporary agnosticism in the West.... He claims to want to “reignite the Franciscan revolution,” which is universally accessible and inclusive, offering healing and liberation. As such, he is building a bridge between the Christian mystical tradition and estranged seekers of every ilk.... *Eager to Love* is neither a biography of Francis nor a history of the Franciscan order, but Rohr’s reflections on the best aspects of the Franciscan heritage as lived out by its founder and its early worthies—Clare, Bonaventure and Dun Scotus.

—*National Catholic Reporter*

“*Eager to Love* illuminates the path of Francis of Assisi as a path of evolving life toward integral wholeness.”

—**Ilia Delio, O.S.F.**, author, *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St. Francis*

“A gift to all Franciscan-hearted people everywhere!”

—**Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M.**, author, *The Last Words of Jesus: A Meditation on Love and Suffering*

“This book captures the essence of our Franciscan spirituality. Richard has woven a masterful tapestry that combines ancient sources with cutting edge experience and thought. He writes with the authority of a man who has faithfully embraced our life for over half a century, an authentic mystic drawing on his own experience. This book may indeed help re-ignite the Franciscan revolution in our twenty-first century.”

—**Robert Lentz, O.F.M.**

“A marvelous, companionable book for those eager to love as Francis and Clare loved. Both philosophical and experiential, theological and historically based, *Eager to Love* is itself a chronicle and sustained meditation on how Friar Richard has come to understand and live the Franciscan life he vowed as a young man. It is a wisdom book packed with insight, compassion, and love – a mellowing and deepening of a modern prophetic voice.”

—**Murray Bodo, O.F.M.**, author, *Francis and Jesus*

Breathing Under Water  
Companion Journal

RICHARD ROHR



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Rohr is a globally recognized Catholic and Christian teacher focusing on mystical and transformational traditions and is the founder and director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, home of the Rohr Institute. He is the author of more than twenty books, including *Yes, And... Daily Meditations*; *Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation*; *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*; *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*; and *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*.

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

—JESUS (LUKE 5:31)

“You see, alcohol in Latin is *spiritus* and you can 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

“Breathing Under Water,”

CAROL BIELECK, R.S.C.J.

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, not death, nor drowning.

That when the sea comes calling you stop being good neighbors

Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance, neighbors

And you give your house for a coral castle,

And you learn to breathe underwater.

## INTRODUCTION

I was very much surprised by the continuing response to my original 1989 audio set called *Breathing Under Water*, and later very challenged when Franciscan Media asked me to put some of these ideas into book form (2011), but then both astounded and gratified when the response only deepened and widened after its publication. Many of us began to recognize that what we once imagined was a small category of “addicted” people, was really all of us. Only the nature of the addiction changed from person to person.

My work over twenty-five years in teaching contemplative prayer and practice to many people in many cultures has made me deeply aware that there is one universal addiction that all of us suffer from: we are all addicted to ourselves. Already the early Desert Fathers and Mothers had discovered that human beings are universally addicted to *their* way of thinking which they take as natural, inevitable, and “Doesn’t everybody process ideas the same way as I do?” Doesn’t everybody “feel” as I do? The Buddhists and many psychologists called this *unrecognized but constant self-referencing*—quite simply ego or egotism.

Jesus, with a quite unique but striking metaphor said that “this single grain of wheat had to fall on the ground and die,” or it would never bear much fruit (John 12:24). You really cannot explain that one away! Yet we did, and largely made the Christian religion, and most religion, about dressing up and dignifying our single and particular grain of wheat. No talk of practical, daily dying is allowed!

Each in our own way, we are all breathing, or trying to breathe, while not recognizing that we are first of all “underwater” — under the water of our own untested assumptions, our cultural blindness, the compulsive neurological responses often inherited from family and childhood, our early wounding (which somehow seems to be universal), and the narcissism of our own egoic responses to almost everything, including most especially our learned defenses to that early wounding—which are almost entirely unconscious and well-practiced by now.

It is the beginnings of enlightenment to begin to see this and to begin to raise our periscope above the water level. Only then might we see and find pure air to actually breathe in and out. Some might call it the air of the Spirit.

As long as you stay “underwater” you will not breathe, but you will drown instead—while not calling it drowning but presume it is “living.” Most peoples’ initial level of free response is very limited. While thinking they are surely “doing their own thing,” they are almost totally programmed, conditioned, and addicted to everybody else’s thing and everybody else’s wounding *It is the foundational work of spirituality to increase, deepen, and expand your true inner freedom* (see Galatians 5:1), so you can maturely *act* and not just re-act.

It was the spiritual genius of Bill Wilson, Doctor Bob, their circle of admitted addicts, and the influence of many of the key ideas of the “Oxford Group” from 1919–1939 that all coalesced to an astounding epiphany among a group of sincere seekers toward the end of that period. It became the practical Twelve Step program in, of all places, Akron, Ohio—probably because the depth of the suffering and addiction had become “unmanageable” for so many

at that time. For me, it is clearly a work of the Holy Spirit, precisely because of the coming together of so many forces, ideas, and key people without any single person or one single idea steering the insights. Like the first Pentecost, it was a descent of many tongues of fire and many tongues of speech (Acts 2:1–13) in Akron, Ohio.

For me, part of the genius of the Twelve Step program is that it combines very deep and rather obvious Scriptural principles (although not obvious till someone tells you!), a Jesuit and Catholic sense of the discernment of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10), much hard-earned pastoral wisdom, good psychology on how people change, along with a kind of American pragmatism and practicality that has now moved it all over the world with continuing but quiet success. This feels like Gospel.

I am especially gratified that the book, and now surely this wonderful study guide created by the hard and creative work of others, seems to be largely spreading by word of mouth and not by any media blitz or merchandizing strategy. This work is especially used by those who work in jails, prisons, and rehab programs, and beyond denominational or faith boundaries, or with those who enjoy book study groups. This study guide is made-to-order for all of them.

I have every hope that this program and guide will help many precisely because it begins where the Gospel and honest psychological change begin—by the sharing of human vulnerability and human pain. Not by ideology, ideas from above, mere theories, or mere theology. Its starting place is not an abstract salvation theory but a concrete recognition of human suffering, how much of it is self-generated, and *our desire to be in solidarity with the suffering of others* (instead of adding to it by accusation), and thus to spiritually

learn from one another. Peer preaching you might call it, although it does not usually feel like preaching at all.

For too long we have made the starting place “sin” in the Christian world, spent an awful lot of time trying to convince already shamed people of how shameful they indeed were. What a waste of time and God’s mercy! The vast majority just tried to hide, run, or deny. We all know it is true—read the statistics. This is our postmodern, Western world, which only runs to even more addictions and farther from so much organized religion to lessen the irrational suffering, when, as Pope Francis said, the Church was meant to be “a field hospital on the edge of the battleground.” If so, maybe the Twelve-Step program is the field manual and the triage guidebook for Christian life.

When the suffering becomes as great and as evident as it is in our world and in our country today, we have almost no place left to hide and every place left to heal.

This feels like *Gospel hope and Spirit generated desire*. I think it surely is.

Easter Sunday, 2015  
Center for Action and Contemplation  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

## HOW TO USE THIS COMPANION JOURNAL

The quotes selected here offer nuggets of wisdom from *Breathing Under Water*. If you read the book a number of years ago, it will remind you of the key points. If you haven't yet read the book, it will be an introduction to Fr. Richard's thoughts on this topic. Reading or rereading the book after working with the companion journal will give you a deeper engagement with the text. You may want to read the chapter in the book as you work through the questions and exercises included here.

The beginning of each chapter gives the relevant step from the Twelve Steps and a selection of passages from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Refer back to these while you are working through the material. They are reminders of the central theme of each chapter and how it fits into both the Christian tradition and the Twelve Step program.

At the end of each chapter, "Breathing Lessons" give you the opportunity to work through several activities that will make the message of the chapter a deeper part of your daily life.



CHAPTER ONE

## *Powerlessness*

“Like a weaver, you roll up my life, and cut it from the loom. From dawn to night you are watching my failure. I cry aloud until the morning, but like a lion you crush all my bones. I twitter like a swallow, I moan like a dove.”  
—ISAIAH 38:12–14

“I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the very things I want to do, and find myself doing the very things I hate...for although the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not.”  
—ROMANS 7:15,18

“And when Jesus looked at the crowds, he felt sorry for them, because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.”  
—MATTHEW 9:36

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

—STEP  
ONE  
*of the*  
TWELVE  
STEPS









Each in our own way, we are all breathing, or trying to breathe, while not recognizing that we are first of all “underwater” — under the water of our own untested assumptions, our cultural blindness, the compulsive neurological responses often inherited from family and childhood, our early wounding (which somehow seems to be universal), and the narcissism of our own egoic responses to almost everything, including most especially our learned defenses to that early wounding—which are almost entirely unconscious and well-practiced by now.

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