

## BEING REAL, PART THREE

### SPIRITUAL TOOLS FOR AUTHENTIC LIVING

A Series of Excerpts for Further Study and Reflection

## BEING REAL ABOUT YOURSELF

Most commentators would agree that the road to authentic life begins with an examination of the self. Being honest about our fear, our anger, and our shortcomings is the beginning of maturity. When we are open and trusting enough in our relationships to confide in others about our shadow side, then we are on the road to authenticity and peace.

In his address called "God's Workshop," at Trinity Institute's conference on Benedictine spirituality, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, made it clear that the peace and stability of a monastic community depends upon the openness and honesty of its members. That same kind of transparency, both with self and others, is the key to all authentic human relationships.

### Transparency

Rowan Williams

Those who belong to a community such as Benedict describes are [required to practice careful self-examination. They are expected, for instance, not to entertain deceit in their hearts. Intriguingly enough, they are also told not to give a false peace. [They are expected] to acknowledge their culpability in any situation of wrong, a principle that the Desert Fathers regularly stressed. To be daily mindful of death. To deal without delay with evil thoughts, breaking them against the rock of Christ and to make them known to a "spiritual" Father. Also, a familiar precept from the Desert Fathers.

So these and other precepts suggest that one of the basic requirements of [an authentic spiritual] life is honesty, and first, honesty about yourself. You need to know how to spot the chains of fantasy, which is exactly what the word "thoughts" --*logismoi*, in Greek--meant for the Desert Fathers. You need to

understand how the chains of fantasy are deeply rooted in a weak and flawed will. You need to make your soul inhospitable to untruth about yourself. An exposure of your fantasies to an experienced elder is an indispensable part of learning the skills of diagnosis here. In the background are the analyses of people like ... Cassian, who pinpointed what simple boredom could do in a [monastic] life where ordinary variety of scene and company is missing. The mind becomes obsessional, self-enclosed, incapable of telling sense from nonsense. The reality of the other in its unyielding difference is avoided by retreating into the private world where your own preference rules unrestricted. Hence, the stress on making your thoughts known. It's a simple way of propping open the door of the psyche, a way of making incarnate the consciousness that God sees us with complete clarity in every situation.

To become in this way open to your own scrutiny through the listening ministry of the trusted brother or sister, that's to take the first step towards an awareness of the brother or sister that is not illusory or comforting. And I think that the recommendation against giving false peace belongs in this context. One of the ways in which we can retreat into privacy is the refusal to admit genuine conflict, to seek for a resolution that leaves me feeling secure without ever engaging the roots of difference. If we are to become transparent, we must first confront the uncomfortable fact that we're not naturally and instantly at peace with everybody. Now this could, of course, read like a commendation of the attitude that declines reconciliation until complete justice to me has been done. But I don't think this is what Benedict is thinking of. The recommendation about not giving false peace follows immediately two precepts about anger and resentment. Taken together with the warning against false peace, that suggests that being wary of facile reconciliation is not about a suspicion of whether the other has adequately made reparation to me, but about whether I have fully acknowledged and dealt with my own resentments. It's a hesitation over my own honesty about peace, not about the other's acceptability to me.

Now one of the most profound books I know on the subject of Christian community is by the late and very great Donald Nichol. He wrote a wonderful journal of his time as rector of the Ecumenical Institute at Tantor, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It's called *The Testing of Hearts: A Pilgrim's Journal*. And he records there a conversation with a visiting Spanish scholar who observes that many members of the community at Tantor have come "with much heavy matter of unforgiveness and resentment lodged inside them from previous experience. It is precisely those who talk most about community building who block the flow because they are the ones least aware of the matter of

unforgiveness that they are carrying around with them, like a lead ball attached to their waists.” Is this part of what’s meant by the warning against false peace, to talk about community building as an alibi for addressing the inner weight of your own anger and grief? And it isn’t irrelevant that Donald Nichol contrasts the attitude of the Catalan Benedictines who live at the core of the community with that of the more transient visiting scholars who all come with an agenda that connects to other settings and other communities. The issues are different for those who are not trying to live with stability.

--Rowan Williams, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 11-14.

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*In his book of memoirs, Telling Secrets, Frederick Buechner argues for the same kind of transparency.*

I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell. They are telling in the sense that they tell what is perhaps the central paradox of our condition-- what we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in all our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else. It is important at least to tell from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are--even if we tell it only to ourselves--because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing. It is important to tell our secrets too because it makes it easier that way to see where we have been in our lives and where we are going. It also makes it easier for other people to tell us a secret or two of their own, and exchanges like that have a lot to do with what being a family is all about and what being human is all about. Finally, I suspect that it is by entering that deep place inside us where our secrets are kept that we come perhaps closer than we do anywhere else to the One who, whether we realize it or not, is of all our secrets the most telling and the most precious we have to tell.

--Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991) 2-3.

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*In his book, Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer argues that the key to self-examination and authentic life is listening honestly to your life.*

I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and the values at the heart of my identity, not the standards by which [I think] I must live --but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life. Behind this understanding of [self] is a truth that the ego does not want to hear because it threatens the ego's turf: everyone has a life that is different from the "I" of daily consciousness, a life that is trying to live through the "I" who is its vessel. This is what ... every wisdom tradition teaches: there is a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me, with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self.

It takes time and hard experience to sense the difference between the two--to sense that running beneath the surface of the experience I call my life, there is a deeper and truer life waiting to be acknowledged. That fact alone makes "listen to your life" difficult counsel to follow. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that from our first days in school, we are taught to listen to everything and everyone else but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the peoples and powers around us. ...

But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strength and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for "wholeness" [and authenticity] is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of.

In the chapters to come, I speak often of my own mistakes--of wrong turns I have taken, of misreadings of my own reality--for hidden in these moments [of truth] are important clues to my own [identity.] I do not feel despondent about my mistakes ... though I grieve the pain that they have sometimes caused others. Our lives are "experiments with truth" (to borrow the subtitle of Gandhi's autobiography), and in an experiment negative results are at least as important as successes. I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made.

--Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 4-7.

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*Rowan Williams goes on to argue that this kind of openness and transparency allows for the creation of an atmosphere where peacemaking is the currency of the community.*

Now rumor suggests that monastic communities are not always completely immune to power struggles. But the point is that the *Rule* provides a structure that will always challenge any assumption that conflict is the default position in common life. Put this another way, what the *Rule* outlines is what is to be the currency of the community. All communities need a medium of exchange, a language that assures their members that they're engaged in the same enterprise. It involves common stories and common practices, things you can expect your neighbor to understand without explanation, ways and styles of doing and saying things and probably, though Benedict wouldn't like me saying this, shared jokes. Once again, though, Donald Nichol has a pertinent story. This time he's listening to a visiting English priest who tells him about his experience of doing a university mission. Father Aden is naturally interested in what the currency of the university is, and he spends time trying to pick up what people talk about and how. And eventually Aden said, "One day the penny dropped. What did those people exchange with one another when they met? You'd be surprised. They exchanged grievances. So the currency of the university is grievances." I guess most of us know institutions like that.

Donald Nichol ... translates [notion of currency] into the image of the circulation of the blood in a body. What you receive is what you give, what you put into circulation. Like the old saying about computers, garbage in, garbage out, if you put in grievance, you will get back grievance. And he refers to an elderly religious in a monastery in Yorkshire, unobtrusive and to the untutored eye rather idle. He sits around most of the day watching television. But it is he, says Nichol, who sets the currency of goodness and kindness circulating through that community. Without some such input into the circulation, communities will be at best dry and at worst deadly.

Peacemaking, then, is more than a commitment to reconciling those at odds. On its own, a passion for reconciliation, as we've seen, can be a displacement for unresolved angers and resentments. What it may put into circulation is anxiety or censoriousness, certainly a situation of tense untruth when there is pressure to make peace at all costs. The peace which the *Rule* envisages is more like this currency we've been thinking about, a habit of stable determination to put into the life of the body something other than grudges. And for that to happen, the individual must be growing in the transparency we began with, aware of the

temptations of drama, the staging of emotional turbulence in which the unexamined ego is allowed to rampage unchecked.

It's all quite difficult for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, isn't it? We've been told, quite rightly, that it's bad to deny and repress emotion. Equally rightly, we've been told that it is poisonous for us to be passive under injustice. Now the problem, which half an hour on the street outside and five minutes watching reality broadcasting on television will reinforce, as strongly as you would want, is that we so readily take this reasonable corrective to an atmosphere of unreality and oppression as an excuse simply for promoting the dramas of the will. The denial of emotion is a terrible thing. But what takes time is learning that the positive path is the education of emotion, not its uncritical indulgence which actually locks us far more firmly into our mutual isolation. Likewise, the denial of rights is a terrible thing. And what takes time to learn is that the opposite of oppression is not a wilderness of litigation and reparation and recrimination, but the nurture of concrete shared respect. The *Rule* suggests that if concern with rights and reparations fills our horizon, the one thing we shall never attain is unselfconsciousness. Respect is another of those worn-smooth tools that are simply there as an extension of my bodily being. None of this is learned without the stability of the workshop. The community that freely promises to live together before God is one in which both truthfulness and respect are enshrined. I promise that I will not hide from you and that I will also at times help you not to hide from me or from yourself. I promise that your growth towards the good God wants for you will be a wholly natural and obvious priority for me, and I trust that you have made the same promise. And we have a lifetime for this. Without the promise, the temptation is always for the ego's agenda to surface again, out of fear that I shall be abandoned once the truth is known, fear that I have no time or resource to change as it seems I must. But no one is going to run away, and the resources of the community are there on my behalf.

--Rowan Williams 15-18.

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*Joan Chittister also thinks self-examination is critical to leading an authentic spiritual life. Humility is the key to self-knowledge: Being willing to figure out what we seek in any given situation and then asking whether it is in accord with what God wants.*

Humility is a Benedictine value. Do we need that now? In a culture that hoards money and titles and power and prestige like gold? Benedict makes the keystone

value of his rule of life a chapter on humility that was written for Roman men in a Roman society that valued machoism and power and independence at least as much as ours. It's humility, Benedict taught, that provides the basis for human community and a basis for union with God. The first degree of humility, the *Rule* teaches, is to keep the fear of God, the wondrous awe of God, always before one's eyes. And those implications are obvious. To live well in this world, we must steep ourselves in the mind of God. We must ask what God wants for the world, rather than simply what we want for our private and personal, our public and national and political selves. We have bartered the future for the sake of the comfort of a few, but no peoples have the right to gobble up the world for their own sakes. We must all come again to fear God. We've made ourselves the gods of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to whom the rest of the world pays tribute, from whom much is sacrificed by those least able to sacrifice it, and because of whom both blessing and chaos happen. ...

... No doubt about it, there's great room for fear of God here. The arrogance of those who make themselves the center of the universe is destroying our world, and our technology has outstripped our souls. No, superiority has not saved us. We need **the wisdom of humility** now. We need that quality of life that makes it possible for people to see beyond themselves, to value the other, to touch the world gently and peacefully and make the whole world better as we go.

Peace is a Benedictine value, and we need it now. Benedictine spirituality is a spirituality consciously designed to disarm the heart, to soften the soul, to quiet the turmoil within. It is a vision of nonviolence in a world for which violence is the air we breathe, the songs we sing, in our national anthems, the heroes we worship, and the business we do. ... Be soft with others, the *Rule* teaches, and you will have peace. Be simple in your needs, and you will have peace. **Be humble** in what you demand of life, and you will have peace. Be giving in what you take to life, and you will have peace. Refuse to make war on the innocent others in order to vanquish your political enemies, and you will have peace. And stop the wars within yourself, and you will have peace. Peace comes from not allowing any part of us to control the better rest of us. Peace depends on our being gentle with ourselves, gentle with the earth, and gentle with the other.  
-- Joan Chittister, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 27-30.

*In the final panel discussion at Trinity Institute's conference on the authentic spiritual life there was an exchange among the speakers that summed up the connection between*

*humility, self-examination and being real about yourself. The exchange was triggered by a question from the audience that asked the speakers to think about how Benedictine spirituality encourages authentic relationships.*

### **Kathleen Norris**

The word “humility” comes to mind, of course. There’s a whole chapter [on Humility in Benedict’s] *Rule*. But I think for me, rather than reading the *Rule*, it was what I would hear monks and nuns say to me [over and over again]: “I may be wrong, this person who is accusing me may be right.” It’s asking the right questions: “What would it cost me to admit I might be wrong?” Those kinds of practices are really very simple, but also very profound. Why is it so important to be right? Just asking those kinds of questions continually, I think, is a good antidote to [the conflict that] is happening [in the churches] now, where it’s more important to have the right answer and be secure in that and, then, contend with everyone else who doesn’t have the right answer. There are other approaches and I think Benedict can really help [us] get there.

### **Rowan Williams**

Isn’t it interesting that there’s a quite different kind of aura around “I want to be right” from “I want to be truthful”? I think very often we get stuck these days in an “I want to be right” frame of mind. But “I want to be truthful” is in effect saying, “Look, I’ve got a lot of work to do and I need your help with it.”

### **Joan Chittister**

Clearly, Kathleen and I think a lot alike about many things. I want to commend Chapter Seven of the *Rule of Benedict* to anyone who has that kind of a question here. I’m a person who believes two things about [that] chapter seven on humility. One, that humility is not an American virtue. And we do not seek it with the lust of the deer on the way to running water, which is why we need it so badly. Secondly, the chapter on humility is absolutely the keystone chapter of the *Rule of Benedict*. And it has been skipped over because pop psychology has confused humility with debasement. Humility and humiliation are not synonyms. And we did go through a very, very dark period in the ... history of spirituality, where humility was made humiliation. You should flee that like the plague. But, on the other hand, ...don’t think that you can possibly have Benedictine spirituality without a spirituality of humility. ... [How else] can you stay in the order, in the denomination, in the group, in the parish, where the differences are indeed so intensely frustrating? It’s because you are developing humility. I suggest that you give that chapter a great deal of contemplative

consciousness, but that you do it with other people's [help.] The meaning of those words from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century just simply don't translate to now. If you get yourself some help from that chapter, you'll know how beautiful it is, and you will develop peace in your own heart.

**Laurence Freeman**

I have the answer for American humility.

**Joan Chittister**

Go.

**Laurence Freeman**

Self-knowledge.

**Joan Chittister**

Yes.

**Laurence Freeman**

I think if we see humility as self-knowledge, that's a very attractive virtue for modern people. Everyone wants to know themselves, and I think in coming to know yourself you need community, you need relationship, because you can't know yourself in isolation. You don't exist in isolation.

--Closing Panel, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 16-19.

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