

Mystery and Multiplicity

Fr. Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

I believe in both Mystery and multiplicity. Maybe that does not sound like something to believe in? Maybe to religious believers it almost sounds pagan. But I don't think so. My very belief and experience of a loving and endlessly creative God has led me to trust in mystery and to love multiplicity. That is the universe that I inhabit, and the only world that exists, as far as I can see. It is the universe that God allows and apparently loves, and so do I.

I am a Franciscan by choice for 45 years and a priest by ordination for 36 years. I have had the good fortune of teaching and preaching in much of the world, while also struggling to make sense of my experience in my own tiny world. This life journey has led me to love mystery—and to *not need* to change it—or to make it un-mysterious. This has put me at odds with many other believers that I know, who seem to have a strange penchant for certitude, order, and explanations for everything.

What religious belief has done for me is make me very comfortable with ambiguity—and ten thousand forms of it! “Hints and guesses” as T.S. Eliot would say. I often spend the time of Lent alone in a hermitage. This is a privilege that my Franciscan vocation allows me. The more I am alone with the Alone, the more I find myself surrendering to ambivalence, to happy contradictions and seeming inconsistencies in myself and in almost everything else, including God. Paradoxes do not scare me anymore; in fact they well name the universe. Once you have knocked on the Absolute that grounds and holds it all, you find that *you* can hold a lot too.

When I was young, I could not tolerate such ambiguity. My very education had trained me in a lust for answers and explanations. I wanted to know, I needed to know, I often did know, or at least I thought I did. Now at age 63, it is all quite different. I have counseled too many prisoners, worked with too many failed marriages, watched too many nature programs, faced my own dilemmas too many times, and been loved gratuitously after too many failures, to believe that this is a *quid pro quo* universe.

The universe is clearly existing inside of a very different logic than our dualistic minds can process. Without patience, mercy, and daily surrender, I could not live sanely inside of it. The world's only coherence seems to be inside of a certain incoherence. The only perfection I see is when we can accept—and even love—a seeming imperfection. If religion is not teaching this radical patience with Mystery, I do not believe it is preparing people for the only world that actually exists, which is a world of cosmic generosity.

Whenever I think there is a perfect pattern, further reading and study always reveals an exception. (Recently I found out that it is the male seahorses that actually give birth to the young.) Whenever I want to say “only” or “always”, there is invariably someone or something that proves me wrong. I only have to wait, and listen.

Strangely, it is my scientist friends who come up with things like “principles of uncertainty”, dark holes, unmeasurable energy, and a willingness to live inside of hypotheses and theories—until reality reveals itself more fully. It is we religious folks who insist on *answers—now*—that are *always*—true. We religious folk love closure, resolution, and clarity, while daring to think that we are people of “faith”! How strange that the very word “faith” has come to mean its exact opposite. How strange that people taught to trust in darkness, should insist upon total light. And even worse, a “light” that allows them to hate, exclude, and even kill others.

People who have really met the Holy are always humble. I think I can state that categorically. People, who don’t know, usually pretend that they do. People, who know, *always know that they don’t know*. I believe in such tell-tale humility. It is a litmus test for authentic God experience, and is—quite sadly—absent in much of our religious conversation today. My belief and comfort is in Mystery, which should be the very task of religion.

An edited, recorded version of this essay was read by Fr. Richard Rohr on *This I believe*, National Public Radio (NPR), December 2006.

©2006 Richard Rohr. Reprinted by arrangement with This I Believe, Inc. To read and hear other essays, and to submit your own, visit www.thisibelieve.org.