



MISSION ENRICHMENT

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The Spirit of the Gospel in Service of the Mission

Our lives improve only when we take chances...
and the first and most difficult risk we can take is to be honest with ourselves.

~ Walter Anderson, American Editor and Publisher

How to Be Here

By Rob Bell (excerpt in *Spirituality & Health*, March 2016)

Before anything else can be said about you, you have received a gift.

Breath: I once watched a doctor hold my newborn son upside down by the ankles and give him a shake. I was shocked. What? You can do that to a baby? Because up until that moment I was under the impression that babies were incredibly fragile, like a high-grade combination of porcelain and glass. But the doctor handled him when he first entered the world like he was made of rubber. He did this, I quickly learned, for a very specific reason: He was trying to help my son take his first breath. Because if you don't take

a breath in those first few seconds when you arrive, you have a very, very serious problem.

And so my boy in all his shiny pink glory hung there, upside down, with strange liquids exiting his various orifices, and then he coughed and gasped and took his first breath.

Remembering that day takes me to another day, this one a decade later. It was a Friday night, August 22, 2008, and my family and I were visiting my grandma Eileen. My grandma and I had been great friends since I was young. When I was in my late twenties and early thirties, she and I had lunch together every Friday for a decade. We, as they say, rolled deep.

But when we went to visit her that evening in August, everything was different. She was in her mid-eighties and her health had been declining over the past year and she'd been moved to a different part of the nursing home where she lived. We knew we were getting close to the end, but I still wasn't expecting what we experienced when we entered her room. She was lying in bed, her eyes closed, taking

long, slow breaths, but something about her was absent.

It was like she was in the room, but not in the room. Here, but already gone.

If you've ever been in the room with someone who is dying, you know exactly what I'm talking about. There's a physical body right there in front of you, but something's missing. Spirit, soul, presence, essence—whatever words you use for it, there's a startling vacancy you feel in being with someone you've been with so many times before and yet that person isn't there anymore.

I froze in the doorway, watching her lying on the bed, as it began to sink in that she was at the end of her life. You know someone is going to die because you know we're all going to die—you know it in your brain. But then there's a moment when that truth drops from your brain to your heart, like an elevator in free fall, and lands with a thud.

My wife Kristen, however, walked right over to the bed, sat down next to Grandma, took Grandma's hands in her own, and leaned in over her heart and began to speak to her:

"Grandma, we're here with you now. We see that you're going to be leaving us soon."

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Ideas or comments are welcome.

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Step 7: Letting God

We humbly asked [God] to remove our shortcomings. --Step 7 of the *Twelve Steps*

We can never engineer or guide our own transformation or conversion. If we try, our so-called conversion will be self-centered and well-controlled, with most of our preferences and addictions still fully in place but now well disguised. Any attempts at self-conversion would be like an active alcoholic trying to determine his own rules for sobriety. God has to radically change the central reference point of our lives. We do not even know where to look for another reference point because up to now it has all been about me! Too much “me” can never find “you”--or anything beyond itself.

So Step 7 says that we must “humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings.” Don’t ever bother to go after your faults yourself because you will usually go after the wrong thing (the real thing remains denied in the unconscious). Or you might actually obstruct your “golden shadow” which is your gift. “If you try to pull out the weeds, you might pull out the wheat along with it,” as Jesus puts it (Matthew 13:29).

Instead you have to let God reveal your real faults to you, usually by falling many times, and by other people’s opinions of you. You must allow God to remove those faults in God’s way and in God’s time. If you go after them with an angry stick, you will soon be left with only an angry stick--and the same faults at a deeper level of disguise and denial. Thus most people at early stages in alcoholic recovery just replace one addiction with another. Now it’s nicotine, caffeine, shopping, “stinkin’ thinkin’,” or the angry stick itself, which is supposedly okay because it is a Christian angry stick.

Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock,

and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). He was telling us to stay in the position of a beggar, a petitioner, a radical dependent. This is always our spiritual posture, if we are honest. **To know that you don’t know, to know that you are always in need, keeps you situated in right relationship with Life itself.** Life is a gift, totally given to you without cost. A daily and chosen “attitude of gratitude” will keep your hands open to allow and receive life at ever-deeper levels of satisfaction. But don’t ever think you deserve or have earned it. Humility is foundational. Those who live with such open and humble hands receive life’s gifts in abundance and throughout their years, “full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over into their lap” (Luke 6:38).

Step 7: When have you tried to eliminate a fault, only to have it reappear later? How might you be more patient with yourself and your faults? How can you begin to see failure as an opportunity to grow?

Step 8: Making a List

We made a list of all the persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. --Step 8 of the *Twelve Steps*

Despite the higher economy of grace and mercy lived and taught by Jesus, he did not entirely throw out the lower economy of merit or “satisfaction.” They build on one another. The lower level simply finds itself inadequate to the truly great tasks of life--love, forgiveness, unjust suffering, and death itself. The universal principle is called “transcend and include.” When you move to higher states of love and transformation, you do not jump over the earlier stages but must go back and rectify the earlier wrongs, or there will be no healing or open future for you or

for those you have hurt.

Our family, friends, associates, and enemies need a clear accounting to be free themselves and go ahead with their lives. Often they just need to talk it through, hear our understanding, and receive our sincere apology. Usually they need to offer their understanding of the situation and how it hurt them. No shaming or guilt is helpful here. Neither side needs to accuse or defend, but just state the facts as we remember them and be open to hear what the other needed, heard, or felt. This has developed into a true art form that some rightly call “redemptive listening” or “nonviolent communication.”

Unfortunately, few of us were taught nonviolent communication at the personal level. Is it any surprise that we do not have the skills at the national, cultural, or church levels? Understandably, our history is full of wars and violence. We have not developed much capacity for redemptive listening or “fighting fair.” Thankfully, many are now rebuilding society from the bottom up; honest communication



skills are now being taught to married couples, families, therapists, children, prisoners, and educators. I see life coaches and martial arts instructors teach nonviolence more directly and more effectively than most Sunday sermons or religious education classes, which have tended to proceed from much more dualistic thinking.

Step 8 is quite programmed, concrete, and specific. "Make a list," it says, of all those we have harmed. The plan is absolutely inspired. The Twelve Steps program knows that we need to push the addict out of his or her immense selfishness. A.A. and other Twelve-Step groups are the only ones I know that are willing and honest enough to just tell people up front, "You are damn selfish!" Or, "Until you get beyond your massive narcissism you are never going to grow up." They are similar to Jesus who told us without any hesitation that we had to "deny" ourselves (Mark 8:34) to go on the journey. Most of us still do not believe that, much less like it. After years of shaming and guilt producing sermons, clergy do not have much freedom to talk this way, but Twelve Step sponsors do!

Step 8: What relationships would you like to redo? Write about things you did wrong, things you might have done differently. What change can you make today?

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COMPUTER VIRUS

(from *Hilarious One Liners*)

Watch out for the new computer virus.
It causes you to send the same email twice...
or to send a blank...
or to send that email to the wrong person...
or to send it back to the sender...
or to forget to attach the attachment...
or to hit DELETE instead of SEND...
or worse, to hit SEND when you meant to hit DELETE.
It's called the C-NILE VIRUS and it can't be stopped!



How to be Here
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We love you and we have loved being with you all these years and now we're letting you go...

It was so moving.

We spent a few hours with Grandma that evening, and then we left and within a few hours she died.

There is a moment when you arrive and you take your first breath, and then there is a moment when you take your last breath and you leave.

For thousands of years humans have been aware that our lives intimately and ultimately depend on our breath, which is a physical reflection of a deeper, unseen reality. It isn't just breath we're each given—it's life itself.

Before anything else can be said about you, you have received a gift. God/the universe/ultimate reality/Being itself—whatever word you want to use for the source—has given you life. Are you breathing? Are you here? Did you just take a breath? Are you about to take another? Do you have a habit of regularly doing this?

Gift..... Gift..... Gift.

Whatever else has happened in your life—failure, pain, heartache, abuse, loss—the first thing that can be said about you is that you have received a gift.

Often you'll meet people who have long lists of ways they've been slighted, reasons the universe has been unfair to them, times they got the short end of the stick or were dealt a bad hand of cards.

While we grieve and feel and lament and express whatever it is that is brewing within us, a truth courses through the veins of all our bumps and bruises, and it is this: We have received. You're here, you're breathing, and you have received a gift, a generous, extraordinary, mysterious, inexplicable gift. †

5 Ways to Keep One Bad Thing From Ruining Your Day

by Rebecca Webber (*Real Simple*, March 2014)

Your coffee is cold. The dishwasher is on the fritz. And you have just... about... had it. How do you handle these ordinary (yet annoying) setbacks? Try this sage advice from experts who have been there.

Expect the worst. Ari Fleischer, White House press secretary from 2001 to 2003 says: When I was at the White House, I used to tell myself that if every day is a crisis there's no such thing as a crisis. Crises are routine. The trick is to anticipate them. Expect that on any given day, something unexpected will happen. Then it won't rattle you, and you can stay calm as you deal with it. It also helps if you **build a little fluff time into your schedule.** I can herd the cats (or, er, my kids) more easily when there's just enough fudge time to allow for the inevitable missing coat or backpack.

Detach. Is the advice of wellness coach, Margaret Moore. When something bad happens, the brain's amygdala triggers negative emotions, like a fire siren going off in your head. You'll feel less upset if you practice observing instead of reflexively reacting. **Let the thoughts and feelings flow by like clouds rather than chasing them.** Then take a couple of deep breaths and have an inner chat, asking yourself, Am I *overreacting*? *Worrying too much*? *Can I set this aside and come back to it later*? One of the advantages of getting older is that you get better at this. You've been through so many fire alarms that you've learned not to jump out the window.

Admit How You Feel. When something disturbing happens, I tend to gloss over it at first, says Anna Holmes. But 5 or 10 minutes later I have to ask myself what I'm feeling and why I feel that way. And then--it sounds so corny, but it really does work--I acknowledge the feeling. I identify it and own it. Then usually, I can move on. Not that it's erased from my consciousness, but it's put in a place where I can move around it and deal with it. For example, I was recently talking on the phone to a friend and she said something complimentary about someone who had hurt me. After the call, I was overcome with irritation. I thought, *Why am I so grumpy*? Finally I admitted that I

felt irritated, and then the feeling didn't nag me as much anymore. When an emotion is undefinable, it has more power than when you can see it for what it is.

Face It. Coping with unfortunate events and moving on is the definition of resilience according to Steven Southwick, professor of psychiatry at Yale University. You can train yourself to be resilient by using difficult situations as a toughening experience. **Accept what you cannot change, and practice more productive responses.** So, instead of shouting obscenities and banging on the steering wheel when you're stuck in traffic, put on soothing music. Realize that the traffic jam is an opportunity to get better control over your emotions. If you do this over and over again, you will actually change the way that your brain func-

tions. No one enjoys stress and adversity, but they can help you grow.

Fake Joy. We think that we act because of how we feel. But **we also feel because of how we act**, is the insight from Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*. So use this knowledge to change your mood. Jump up and down; getting both feet off the ground makes you feel childlike and energetic. Or go for a walk. Just this morning I got an unnerving e-mail from someone and felt lousy about it. So I headed out for a walk in Central Park with a friend. So many things that tend to make a person happy are wrapped up in one little thing--a walk. It really works! When I got home, I wasn't irritated anymore. I realized, yeah I got my perspective back. †

From the Writings of the Founder

August 30, 1844 letter to Fr. Bellon at Notre Dame de Lumières

The type of ritual I'm referring to here is any special thing you can do on a regular My dear Father Bellon, I have just written a long letter to Father Ricard, which dispenses me from certain details with you, for this Father can communicate to you a part of what I told him. I am happy that you returned to Lumières in good health. Our Oblates must have awaited you impatiently. I would like to tell myself that they did not suffer because of your absence, but the information that Father Ricard gave me makes me fear that that was not so. He says that only two, Brothers Chevalier and Arnoux, behaved themselves very well... ; he tells me that all the others are rather weak, that is in virtue. I cannot tolerate this habit of imperfection in young religious who should be models of piety... and your duty is to be firm in requiring that they fulfil their obligations. You may read my letter to them... I implore you to demand also that they be polite, honest and kind. Do not permit any rudeness. Let them get used to bearing up with one another. Deal severely with any kind of murmur.... It is a question of forming men who are to be imbued with the spirit of Jesus Christ capable of fighting the terrific power of the devil, of destroying his reign among people, of building up the world so as to bring it to the truth and of serving the Church in the most lofty and difficult apostolate. Is it possible to achieve these results with them who are not generous, who have no courage, are devoid of love and have fallen into a rut?... Goodbye, my son. I bless you and all your people.

+ C. J. Eugene. Bishop of Marseilles, Superior General

