

Richard Rohr, Sr. 1910-1999

A NATURAL MENTOR

By Richard Rohr, Jr., OFM

*“Joy was just a thing that he was raised on.
Love was just a way to live and die.
Gold is just a windy Kansas wheat field.
Blue is just a Kansas summer sky.”*

Matthew's Song by John Denver
(Sung at my Father's funeral)

On September 20, my dear Father breathed his last, after ten years of increasing dementia and declining health. My sister Alana and brother Tim were with him at the end, along with several of the grandchildren and in-laws. He had been asking for God to take him for several years, and despite the loss, we were also relieved that his pain was over and he was finally with God and my Mother who died five years ahead of him. At the full length of 89 years, he died at St. Francis Hospital in Topeka, where all of us were born. A great grandson was born on the floor below only two days before. Life had again come full circle, and God's Great Parade was continued.

What a joy it was to be a priest and a preacher on this occasion! What an honor to be able to speak of an uneducated Kansas farm boy who never spoke ill of anybody; who worked for his father on the farm asking only for a plug of chewing tobacco per week; who turned over his earnings at the gas station in Ness City, Kansas, so his other brothers could go to school; who built a secret apartment in the attic of the gas station to hide Negroes who had to be out of town by dusk; who never missed a day of work in 35 years as he painted trains for the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe.

Only as an adult did I realize what a nest of love and security and faithfulness I had been raised in. What I took for granted, so few can even imagine. He was the “end of an era” kind of man. No wonder I do men's work today with confidence and a sense of call. I had a natural mentor an, a “grand” father.

He told me once that he often painted the logo on the side of the Super Chief train cars and engines: “Santa Fe All the Way!” Later when I learned that Santa Fe meant “Holy Faith” in Spanish, I realized that he was painting his own life's motto on the sides of those trains! Now when I see the engines buzz throughout Albuquerque, I recall one life that lived “holy faith all the way” for 89 good years.

One summer afternoon fifty years later, my Father drove my older sister, Carol, to see the old homestead and gas station in Western Kansas where he grew up. At the very moment when they arrived, the old abandoned gas station where he sheltered the “colored people” and saved the money for his brothers' education, was now burning to

the ground. It seemed to actually wait for Richard to witness its brightest flame and its last hurrah.

Perhaps this is merely a son's sentimentality, but perhaps there really is a deeper alignment that our materialistic eyes can no longer see. No wonder I actually believe in Providence, synchronicity, a cosmic egg of meaning, and what we call at New Jerusalem "angels of opportunity." There is a God, but only for those who see God. There is goodness in all things, but only seen by those who are good themselves. Daddy saw without limits. He *saw* goodness and *became* goodness. I wish education and sophistication had given me as much. Richard gave me the essential because Richard never left the Source.

"Daddy," as he asked us to call him, was a happy SEVEN on the enneagram. He saw the best in people and things, and because he saw the best in me, I have been able to believe it in myself and in others. How can you pay for such an internal and inherent gift. It is given without practice or pretending. It is all grace – unearned, unmerited, lying there within, and enlightening everything around – with God. Thank you, Daddy. You gave me not just your name, but much more – your spirit, your soul, your holy faith, and your life-affirming goodness. I get all the praise and notice, but you did all the hard work of manhood and struggle.

No wonder I delight in being "father" to others. No surprise that I now give initiation rites for men all over the world. You taught me – without either of us knowing – how to proudly carry a name "Richard" and a title "Father," but most of all how to carry the glory of being an ordinary "man" on this earth. Without frills. Glorious because connected to everything without even trying! Dignified because utterly unselfconscious. You were a perfect example of what Robert Inchausti calls "the ignorant perfection of ordinary people." You were an unconscious example of what Jesus first gave the world: "a trickle down spirituality" that gives "common men" a natural and calm dignity by connecting them to God. By osmosis, you actually waded into the Eternal Stream, and I now try to put it into words (which is far different from being in the Stream itself).

You only went to the sixth grade, Daddy, and on your sixteenth birthday, stood up and told the nun that you were grateful for the education, especially several grades repeated twice, but the laws of the State of Kansas now allowed you to leave school and return to the farm. It was 1926 and the depression and dust storms were still coming. Were you a loser, Daddy, or did it just take us 89 years to realize you had found a very old way to win? You never left the Source.

Thank you, my Father. You so painted my soul with holy faith that I can point backward and forward, upward and downward and downward and inward at the same time. The Source seems to be everywhere.