

The Two Halves of Life: How did we get them so mixed up? Richard Rohr, OFM

It is striking how often history has recognized that there are at least two major movements in the spiritual journey. I call them the path of ascent and the path of descent. Jesus speaks clearly to Peter of first "dressing yourself," and when you are older "letting others dress you" (John 21:18). Psychologists speak of having an ego before you let go of your ego. C.G. Jung speaks of the task of the first half of life as being "individuation" and the second half being "transcendence." The wisdom of India tells a man that he is first a student and householder, and later a "forest dweller" and a wise man. They all intuited something that we are beginning to see was crucial for cultural survival and personal transformation, and yet modern humanism has largely forgotten it and even denies it. We treat the young as if they were adults, and then we resent the old because they seem so childish. Maybe there is a connection.

I am convinced that untold failure and distortion have entered the worlds of psychological development and transformative spirituality because we have not honored these two stages in proper sequence, and therefore have not honored them at all. The tasks, the appropriate energies, and the goals themselves end up being jumbled and confused. When we don't recognize that there are two major life tasks, we usually produce rigid personality structures in the second half of life because they are still idealizing the containment rules for the first half of life. We also produce false surety and grandiosity in young men in the first half of life because they take their petty ego concerns to be final or significant goals. In Jesus words, the elderly keep building "bigger barns" and becoming "fools" (Luke 12:18) when they should be generative mentors for the next generation. While the rich young men reject the initiating challenge: "Sell all that you own and give it away" (Luke 18:22). It seems like pure idiocy to a young careerist who thinks that life is all about upward mobility.

Basically, we have the whole thing backward. We raise children as "liberals" to freely figure out and fend for themselves, and then they rightly seek boundaries, overdo it to contain themselves in mid life, and end up materialists, nationalists, militarists, and "power conservatives" by the end of life. As educators have been telling us for most of the last century, the natural movement of the developmental psyche is exactly the opposite. We need to begin "conservative" with clear boundaries, identity, a sense of "choseness," and even a kind of specialness and inherent dignity. I like to call it the narcissistic fix that good parents give their children, and good religion gives its adherents. It is surely the best way to start, but it is not a good way to continue and certainly not where the wise man must be and will be at the end of life.

Then as we grow older "in wisdom, age, and grace" (Luke 2:40) we should move toward more compassionate, tolerant, and forgiving world views, what some people associate with more "bleeding heart liberal" thinking. **The dualistic mind breaks down in the presence of Divine Mystery and human failure, or at least it should break down.** Instead, we largely produce mere ideologues and fundamentalists in the second half of life, who have sadly not done "the fundamentals" of human and spiritual growth. Or we produce a kind of intellectual with-heldness and skepticism that looks like liberal humanism, but is far indeed from any real compassion or generativity toward the world.

True holiness and true wisdom are much deeper and broader than mere liberal thinking, however, so do not think I am trying to equate them at all.

Our deconstructed Western culture is so backwards that we have actually turned around the classic patterns of human growth. No wonder we have so many suicidal and depressed teenagers, and so many unhappy and bitter old men. We are supposed to move from a healthy conservatism to a healthy liberation from the same, but we start with an utterly false and unwarranted liberalism, and end up with self-addicted and stuck people by the age of 50. This is not working.

We need instead, as the Dalai Lama says, to "learn the law very well, so we will know how to disobey it properly." Paul makes the same point with different metaphors: "Through the Law I am dead to the Law, so that now I can live for God" (Galatians 2:18). Augustine is even more daring, "Love God, and do what you want!" Such "free thinking" from the very people that we are supposed to admire, shows how unlike them we really are. In fact, such language even sounds dangerous, antinomian, and libertine instead of religious. But that is only to people who have still not completed the tasks of the first half of life! To them it sounds like heresy, and in fact it is -- for them. But for mature men, who have internalized the values of containment and law, "The human one is master even of the Sabbath." (Luke 6:5.) Or "it matters not at all whether one is circumcised [or its baptismal counterpart] or not, all that matters is that one becomes an altogether new creation" (Galatians 5:15). Sounds like Jesus and Paul are two dangerous heretics to me!

When the second half of life is put at the beginning of life, we have old men and women still asking egocentric questions about their own significance and superiority because they did not have the containment to test their own mettle and find their inherent value when they were young. We also have young people speaking with an arrogance and a self assuredness that is totally undeserved. (This has always been true, I am sure, but at least we once had elders who tempered and tested such flights of fancy instead of empowering them.)

When the needed clarity of the first half of life is put off until the second, it merely becomes strong opinions, absolutes, jingoism, and militarism among older people whom we need at that age for integrity, broad mindedness, true leadership, and the "reign of God." We have very few real statesmen in the world today because most are still operating from a teenage psyche of win/lose and more is better. We are all losers as a result. They do not grow up because they refuse to first "grow down," and we do not grow up because we have no models or true elders.