

LISTENER RESOURCE



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Reconstruction: Let Us Be Up and Building!

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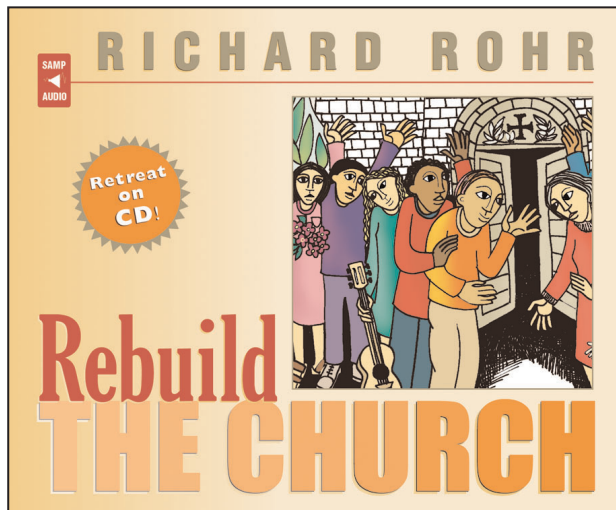
Many conversations and meetings of the last year have led me to some clarifying but also disturbing conclusions. In very brief form, I would like to share these with you. They might be helpful in responding to our “Mending the Breach” question. I know they are providing me with some long-sought direction, and I hope they can do the same for the readers of *Radical Grace*.

It has become evident to many of us that Western Civilization is in the midst of a

major “crisis of meaning.” All of our institutions are suffering. For the past few years I have been quoting Joseph Chilton Pearce, who speaks of the “cracking of the cosmic egg.” Now I am beginning to see how truly devastating that crack is. The symbolic universes inside of which we lived safely have largely fallen apart, leaving only the private psyche on its lonely journey toward meaning.

Mary Jo Leddy, who taught brilliantly at our summer peace and justice conference, said

that all we have left is mere “episodic meaning.” There is no larger mystic story that explains our lives, and each day we must create some personal moment to make ourselves feel significant or even alive. Often this is merely therapy or victimhood. Without sacred mythology, all we have left is private pathology: my little story disconnected from any group story and surely disconnected from any Great Story. That is a lonely and tragic way to live. It is therefore not surprising that we have so many



angry and cynical people in the West today, often looking for someone to blame for their unhappiness. Usually the blame goes to those who supposedly have the power, which locks us into the role of the powerless.

Apparently we are at the long end of what philosophers call “deconstructionism.” It began with the Enlightenment, the critical rationalism of the 18th century, and has continued in various forms of skepticism and sophistry leading to the wholesale “politics of suspicion” that we live today. We are all affected by it to some degree, and it has surely aided us in being more self-critical and rightly critical of ailing beliefs and institutions.

The trouble is that you cannot live on criticism; you surely cannot build anything communal when you start with negation, and finally criticism gives no joy to the present and no hope to the next generation. Behaviorally, it is the opposite of faith and often creates in its participants a sort of anti-faith—toward everything. Now I can see why we proclaim the Creed at the middle of the Christian liturgy (what we *do* believe), as opposed to the whining and complaining that characterizes so many gatherings today (what we are against, what has hurt us, who is wrong and why we should sue!). Something tells me that this is a culture in serious decline and a people who have nothing to believe in. “Without vision, the people will surely perish” (Proverbs 29:18).

Even the much-appreciated “Recovery Movement” seems to assume that there is a previous wholeness to recover to! Ideological feminism has often deconstructed the last 4,000 years of civilization with a kind of reverse messianism that presumes all was well and good when women ran the world. Unfortunately there is no one around to prove it. New Agers and advocates of native spiritualities are “committed” to religions for which there is no accountability but only dreamy private revelations to be used at will. All of which drives the old holders of the Western myth (Judaeo-Christianity) into reactionary fundamentalism and rigid orthodoxy.

All of us, with no “One God before us,” no agreed-upon accountable values, now righteously hold one another accountable in ways that would make the old patriarchs wince! Just witness the absolutism and final judgments in present day political correctness. There is no longer any “mortal sin” in a deconstructed society, but suddenly words like “appalled,” “outraged,” “violated” and “raped” are common parlance. “Insensitivity” is the cover-all sin by which the new liberal can control and convict you better than any bully pulpit ever did. All in the name of peace and justice, of course.

I suspect that the next generation will not hate the clergy and the establishment so much; they will just hate one another—for all the betrayals, accusations, gossip, arraignments and unforgiveness. Maybe what law and pyramid did was protect us from the invisible poison of unaccountable persons and circles.

As a worldview, deconstructionism refuses any accountability to any outer criteria. There is only the private psyche and its personal experience, its rights and its feelings. There is little ability to appeal to what Vaclav Havel, the poet-president of the Czech Republic, calls “a politics of meaning...not the art of the useful, but politics as practical morality, in service to the truth.”

There is no objective meaning out there for the true deconstructionist. There is no scale by which cultures, ideas, persons and moralities can be measured. It’s finally a jungle of competing rights, and the recent fad or the most powerful/articulate group wins. There is little that is “civil” about it, and one wonders how we will create a great civilization. Everything is “merely,” “only,” “culturally- or gender-biased,” “relative” or “that’s what you are free to think.”

The very use of the word “truth” is a bit of an embarrassment to a liberal, presuming that the word could only come from a right-wing idiot. The result is the dismissal of most great ideas, centuries of Western philosophy, lifetimes of sanctity, sincere folks who have taken the time to do their intellectual and spiritual homework—all in favor of recent American dissatisfaction with the universe. They forget that even the appeal to a “sin” like insensitivity has no validity unless one accepts the Judaeo-Christianity ethic (or some ethic) in the first place. If the deconstructionist is consistent, he or she moves toward the nihilism that we are roundly experiencing in relationships, morality, art and government today.

One wonders if America has basically become ungovernable. If the only appeal is to private rights and privilege, I predict that we will elect a new party and president every four years. Most forget that Aristotle said democracy would only work in a culture *already* committed to *virtue*. There is no communal myth left that teaches us the essentially tragic nature of human life; there is no vision that proclaims the primacy of the common good; there is no transcendent image that makes human virtue a divine reflection. There is no One to reflect and no One to love and serve.

I do not want to belong to a religion which cannot kneel. I do not want to live in a world where there is no One to adore. It is a lonely and labored world if I am its only

center. My life is too short to discover wisdom on my own, to identify and properly name my own self-importance, to learn how to love if I have to start at zero.

I am especially impassioned about the next generation. They seem to have nothing. We have given them less than crumbs, only our own criticism and cynicism about things. As much as I have given my own priesthood to work for reform and change, I must admit that this does little of itself to inspire, transform or unite. It does not of itself point toward Someone to adore, something worth living for, and some things worth dying for. As Václav Havel also says, all we have left in the West are “things worth buying.”

More liberal reforms, all the married and women priests in the world, will not fill the enormous spiritual vacuum of the young—or the old, for that matter. Our people are dying for lack of vision, for lack of transcendent meaning to name their soul and their struggles. What good is inclusive language if no one is even listening to our message? Why would a young person join a group of 50-year-old complainers who are unwilling to speak of God and joy and peace beyond comprehension? These are the obsessive preoccupations of my generation who have had more freedom, change, our-way-of-arranging-the-world, than any generation in human history.

Why are we unwilling to join in the cosmic dance that invites and thrills the would-be searchers? Why are so many of us deconstructed more than we are aware, afraid to kneel and adore *what is*—in the only lifetime we will ever have? Don't we know, in the words of Anne Lamott, that a hundred years from now it will be “all new people!” We must give them something good to build on.

I think it is time for reconstruction. We need to know what we *do* believe, why we are proud of our-only-past, what is good about even the broken things (life, church, state), and how we can begin a new language of responsibility. At this point, I think anything else is a waste of time and refusal of grace. Human life is too short to waste it on the negative. It is too easy to be cynical.

I commit whatever years I have left to *reconstruction* (not regression or rigidity!) of a Church and culture of meaning. Otherwise we will have no positive alternative ready when the deconstructionist system falls apart. I have no doubt that it will because love is always stronger than death. ■