SAVING SOULS AND LISTENING HEARTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONAL LEADERS FROM RICHARD ROHR’S IMMORTAL DIAMOND

Darren Cronshaw
Whitley College, University of Divinity, Melbourne

INTRODUCTION

Those who are passionate about a particular form of Christianity have often channelled their passion into “saving souls.” I applaud their eagerness to share what really is good news about Christianity. However, the language and practice of “soul saving” can suggest a preoccupation of urging people to get “over the line” by saying the right prayer to God and ensuring they are right for eternity. Christians who have left soul saving language behind may still be preoccupied with helping people be certain they are going to heaven and not going to hell. But I am not so sure soul saving, or any form of evangelism at its best, is just about eternal life insurance. The phrase “soul saving” is not commonly used these days in my church circles. Nevertheless, my interest in what it means for me and my ministry context has been aroused by reading and rereading Richard Rohr’s Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self. This article is thus an extended review of Rohr’s Immortal Diamond, discussing his encouragement to listen to our true selves, but also extending that posture beyond individual interiority to listen to congregations, cultures and one’s community.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, is a widely published writer based in New Mexico. He founded the Centre for Action and Contemplation. His conviction is that “and” is the most important word in the title, since it is critical to hold action “and” contemplation together: “And’ demands

1 This article is part of a Baptist Union of Victoria Congregational Revitalisation project funded by a Collier Charitable Fund Grant. The writer appreciates conversations and comments from Samuel Wilson, Research Fellow at Swinburne Leadership Institute; Roslyn Wright, Director of Field Education at Whitley College Theological School; Auburn Life Baptist Church members, and the BUV Mission Catalyst team.


that our contemplation become action; ‘And’ insists that our action is also contemplative.” Rohr is a kind of spiritual sage who invites his readers to think about deep issues and what really drives us. Rob Bell says of him in the book’s endorsements: “reading Richard Rohr is like sitting around the tribal fire, listening to the village elder give words to that which we’ve always known to be true, we just didn’t know how to say it … in showing us what vibrant, Jesus-centered faith looks like.”

So imagining myself sitting around the tribal fire, what does Rohr have to say to my soul, to my practice of mission and evangelism, and to my role in church leadership and revitalization? Ultimately, Rohr invites me to a fresh place of deep listening. His invitation is to listen to my self; to listen to those around me and their journeys, whether they identify as people of faith or not; to listen to my local cultures; to listen to my church and its story; to listen to creation; and to listen and be attentive to my relationships and communities. Of all spiritual practices, I am convinced that listening is the most important practice for soul saving.

**Our Souls Saved?**

Rohr does not actually much use the phrase “soul saving.” He talks more about our journey of looking for our “true self” and leaving our “false self” behind. This can become a false dichotomy that demonises the false self and implies the true self can be found as individuals. I will say more about that critique below and the importance of finding our self within a culture and community. I think it is unhelpful to be preoccupied with the interiority of an individual self. But at least for Rohr, our false self is not something bad. It is our ego, or the container or costume we use for our self-image as we grow up. We accumulate education, money, career, clothing, positions, titles and even religion, and tend to develop our identity based on these things and in comparison with others. But at some stage we need to leave our reliance on those things behind for our true self to emerge. The false self is not bad, but it is simply second base on the way to our true self—we need it but we do not want to remain there forever. The false self is a substitute for our true self into which God invites us to be born again. So saving souls, Rohr

---


5 Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, back cover.

implies for me, begins with heartfelt listening for my true self, for how that is emerging and what it is saying.

The dilemma is that to find our true self, our false self has to die. Thomas Merton indicated previously that what has to die is the “false self” that we do not need; but that death is for the sake of, and the pathway to, life and joy.7 The Johannine Jesus, “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives” (John 12:24 NLT). Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, “When Christ calls someone, he bids that person come and die.”8 Rohr invites us to enter into this journey of dying and being surprised by God’s generous love and the power of the resurrection. This takes a journey, but we do not have to go to Europe to discover this invitation, although a physical journey may help some of us.

Our true self, as Rohr teaches, is who we are in God and who God is in us. It is our reference point for who we really are as created in the image of God, the “Immortal Diamond” that God is fashioning in us, the ground of our being, our deepest soul. When our true self emerges, we can be true to who we are created to be. We can be helped in this by solitude and contemplation. We allow ourselves to be human beings, not just human doers. We grow into a whole new awareness of living in God, and God living in us—not just believing that in our minds but experiencing it in our souls. When we experience this level of union with God, we will practice our spirituality not as a list of “shoulds” or moralistic guidelines, but letting God look out from us on the world and having the same love of life that God demonstrates.9 That sort of soul saving captures my imagination—beginning with my own soul, but also helping other people let God save their souls.

Evangelism as “Soul Saving”

Rohr focuses on searching for our own true self, but he touches on and alludes to the implications of this for our practice of evangelism. Evangelism has sometimes crudely been called “soul saving,” but this is a phrase I want to redeem as a description of evangelism at its best. If soul saving is helping people discover their true selves, then this is a central part of my calling. If it is about helping people, as Rohr suggests, make space for and understand

the Mystery of God and the overflowing grace and love of Jesus, then this is a privilege not a burden. Perhaps we could reframe evangelism and soul saving as spiritual direction or spiritual companionship, but not designed only for Christians. Rohr refers to Jane Fonda articulating: “I feel a presence, a reverence humming within me that was, and is, difficult to articulate.”

What a beautiful place to be. And what a privilege to help people like Jane Fonda move from that place of wonder and seeking, to awareness of God’s goodness and who they are created to be in Christ.

Rohr has a high view of grace and God’s goodness working in all people and all creation. Let us start with celebrating what is good in people, and naming this goodness as being in God’s image and nurtured by God. This is a more appropriate and helpful place to start than pointing out people’s unworthiness as sinners, although there is a truth we need to realize there also, as a communion of sinners. Soul saving or spiritual direction, at its best, is about helping people discern their true self, experience union with God through Christ, and start living from a deep place of contemplation and action in accord with the Reign of God.

Rather than leaving me with less hope for evangelism, Rohr reframes soul saving as helping people reimagine who they really are and what—and who—they are called to. He suggests, “Most souls are initially ‘unsaved’ in the sense that they cannot dare to imagine they could be one with God.” I want to respond to Rohr’s invitation to rediscover the power of stories, metaphors and symbols, which the wrongly named Enlightenment has sought to do away with, but which best help us engage God’s Mystery. Evangelism is not about rationally proving God but inviting people to experience God.

LISTENING FOR SPIRITUAL SEARCH AND STRUGGLE

This evangelistic posture is one of listening. Organic Church leader Neil Cole argues that one of the biggest problems of most evangelism training is that it is preoccupied with telling people what to say, when it would be better to train people how to listen. Cole suggests listening for people’s pain,

---

passion and purpose. According to Australian evangelist Michael Frost, one of the least developed skills for missional leaders and church planters is listening. He quotes Rene Laennec, inventor of the stethoscope, who counselled medical students and practitioners: “Listen to your patients, they are telling you how to heal them.” Listening implies withholding judgement and being attentive to the person in front of us—as they are not how we would hope they should be. When we are preoccupied with our own program or message, we diminish our capacity to hear from the deepest part of people’s souls. Evangelism best starts with where people are—with our listening to their souls and what they are expressing, rather than with our explaining what we think their souls need.

David Tacey, who researches and teaches contemporary spirituality at La Trobe University, has a similar critique and advice for Christians wanting to communicate the good news of their tradition. He suggests that Christians are sometimes too quick to label the resurging “spirituality revolution” as superficial or misguided, rather than listening to it as an expression of a search for spiritual meaning. He encourages attentiveness to how God is communicating with people outside church circles and (echoing Rahner) challenges Christians to seek to draw out from people what they already know and experience about God, instead of striving to pump new information and knowledge in. Says Tacey: “the task ahead for religion is to get connected with the spirit of the time and the spirit in the individual, showing people how and why religion is relevant to their lives.”

Sometimes listening does offer people a gracious space to express their pain, doubt and disappointments. When people express struggle in these directions, it is not incumbent on us to have all the answers. Sitting and listening to pain, and acknowledging the difficulties and dilemmas, is more

18 Tacey, Spirituality Revolution, 198.
likely to lead to more sharing and soul-discovery than pretending to have a satisfactory answer. Our society is increasingly postmodern and people are aware of complexity and mystery. Walter Brueggemann, legendary Old Testament scholar, says that communicating the gospel brings poetry in a prose-flattened world.\(^\text{19}\) In listening, we do not have to iron out the pain. In grappling with complex issues, we do not have to produce straightforward answers. Seasoned campus evangelism worker Rick Richardson counsels: “In the past, being an expert and having the answers were what built credibility and a hearing. Today, having the same questions, struggles and hurts is what builds credibility and gains a hearing.”\(^\text{20}\) This is part of why we need to understand our self and our own pain, to help us be sensitive to the pain of others. Cole shows insight when he says listen to people’s pain. He also says listen for their passion and purpose.

LISTENING FOR VOCATIONAL PASSION

If we can capture a fresh imagination that people are created in the image of God, and that all are called to live according to God’s purpose, then we can expect that in listening we will hear people’s passion and, in that, a hint of how God has made them and where God is calling them. Parker Palmer’s encouragement is to “let your life speak.” By this he means that we need to focus on listening for how God has made us, instead of listening to the voices and expectations of others, or being preoccupied with some image of what we think we, or others, think we “should” be. However, it is also important to listen to the cries of the world in order to see where our passions address the biggest challenges around us. Palmer counsels this approach of listening to both personal passion as well as world pain, and cites Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”\(^\text{21}\)

If our vocation and calling is connected intrinsically with how God has made us, then “soul saving” will be at its best when we cooperate with God in seeking to help people identify the vocation they are created for and help

\(^{19}\) Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 1–7.


them to see where God may want to use them. I have visited churches that celebrate and make space for listening to people’s soul purpose. One church regularly used an interview or video spot in Sunday gatherings to ask someone: “What is your passion?”, “How do you explore your passion?” and “What does this have to do with God?”22 This kind of congregational listening models a practice and cultivates a culture of listening for hints of God-given vocations. The discernment issue is then to explore what passions in one’s life are most worthy of focus. But is not this an essential posture for a missional leader: to discern not only what of their own self will contribute best to the world and the flourishing of the Reign of God, but also to listen attentively to what is emerging in the souls of others?

LISTENING TO LOCAL CULTURES

Another extension of Rohr’s invitation is to listen to local cultures. Perhaps the most profound (re-)discovery of a theological theme in the twentieth-century is of the *missio Dei* or mission of God. With the help of Karl Barth, David Bosch and others, we realise that it is not that the church has a mission to perform, but that mission has a church and God invites the church to cooperate with God’s mission. The burden of mission is lifted, because it is God’s work to enact God’s mission. But God offers people the privilege of being involved.23 If being missional is centring our lives on cooperating with what God is doing in the world to restore the world to God’s dream for us, then we first need to listen to, and discern, what God is up to in the world. Our task as missional leaders, therefore, is to listen to God and to dwell deeply in God’s word, but also to listen to, and understand, our changing cultural context and to listen for what God is doing in the world. The end purpose of this is to enable us to address and communicate what really is good news about the gospel into our context. But we need to listen first. Missional leaders inquire, “What is our culture saying to us?” before we ask, “How will we speak to our culture?”

The history of mission is interspersed with many missionaries who were committed to listening to and learning from local cultures, but unfortunately

---


other missionaries and mission supporters questioned the validity of a listening and learning posture. Mulholland writes that while Pietist missionaries sought to learn not only local language but also the religion, mindset and culture of those to whom they went, and to educate new missionaries with their research and writing, people in Europe were challenging them: “Why are you wasting your time studying heathen religions and heathen cultures? Your business is to rout Hinduism from India, not to propagate heathen superstition in Europe.”

The same kind of cultural imperialism occurs today when Christians think they are too spiritual or do not have enough time to listen to their culture. We need an engaged spirituality that views reading contemporary literature and watching movies as important alongside reading the Bible and praying. We need courses on contemporary culture as well as church history. Missional spirituality necessarily involves engagement with the world as well as contemplative reflection apart from it. At its best, contemplative practices are not merely an end in themselves but help us to create space to be more attentive to God and to God’s world. Thomas Merton taught that the monastic lifestyle was not focused merely on retreating, but argued that the monk “abandons the world only in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depth.”

**Saving a Church’s Soul**

The other implication Rohr does not raise but his book suggests to me is the importance of local churches being prepared to take the journey to find their true self. The majority of churches in our denominational tribe are in decline or plateaued and needing renewal—our churches need soul saving too. Churches, like people in general, are often addicted to the status quo and cling to what they know. They enjoy stability and control. They avoid

24 Kenneth B. Mulholland, “From Luther to Carey: Pietism and the Modern Missionary Movement,” *Bibotheca Sacra* 156, no. 621 (1999): 84. Lest readers think this is just a colonial attitude not anymore present, let me share an anecdote from when the Bible College of Victoria (BCV) in 2008 commenced its Centre for the Study of Islam and other Faiths (http://www.mst.edu.au/faqs/csiof#28). The Centre was established to help mission workers develop an in depth understanding of other religious traditions, especially Islam. In a day when Islamic-Christian relations is one of the most crucial areas in international politics let alone mission, the Centre was a strategic move. Yet some supporters sent BCV letters questioning why the college was teaching and propagating other faiths.


the death of their false selves—all the trappings and forms that may have made them “successful” in the past. Rohr explains how scientism, atheism and secularism can keep people from God, but so too can moralistic boundary markers in religion or when religious practice is so busy with “doing church” and providing the answers that there is little contemplative space to seek and experience God for ourselves. One bishop disparagingly said to Rohr, “I don’t have time for the mystic; we are running a church here.”

But a church that embraces action and contemplation offers life-giving spirituality to its members and to seekers. Contemplative practice is perhaps one of the best gifts the church can offer Western society.

In our local church at AuburnLife, one of our dreams and most basic needs is to develop accessible and sustainable approaches to shared spiritual practices—we might call it the Auburn Way. Whatever else churches do to look for new life and revitalization, it is critical that they find contemplative space to listen to God and to rediscover their own soul as a church. “What is the true self and new life that God wants to birth in us?” is an important question for any church to contemplate. Churches should be a “laboratory for resurrection” to cultivate and celebrate the new life God wants to breathe into the world through the people of God.

Learning from the Rhythms of Creation

As in nature and everywhere, however, one form has to die for another to come to life. Death is a natural part of life and a necessary precursor to resurrection. We can see from Creation that God is a risk taker and full of imagination and creativity. This is good news for churches facing death. God is full of life and shares that life and resurrection hope with people. But we have to go through “death”:

The only rub, and it is a big one, is that transformation and “crucifixion” must intervene in between life and Life. Loss always precedes renewal in the physical and biological universe. This is where we all fumble, falter, and fight. Someone needs to personally lead the way, model and path, and say it is “necessary suffering.” Otherwise we will not trust this counterintuitive path. For Christians, this model and exemplar is Jesus.

---

Rohr has a high view of the human Jesus and Jesus the Christ, and sees Christ’s journey as a map for living. Having our souls saved, guiding other people to let God save their souls, and leading churches in revitalization/resurrection is about following Jesus or entering into the Christ journey of realizing we are beloved, entering into the experience of the cross, waiting at the tomb—a metaphor for sitting with death and waiting for Jesus, and looking forward in faith and hope for resurrection.\(^{30}\)

**MORE THAN INDIVIDUAL SOUL SAVING**

To discover our true self as individuals requires the cost and investment of silence and solitude. We do not experience the resurrection realization of the new life we are called into, without the purging experience of dying to our false self. Rohr’s invitation is to wait expectantly at the tomb—without compulsion to do or to make anything happen—and to be open to the surprising new life and sense of self that emerges.

When our souls are saved through this journey—and by the gift of union with Christ—it is not just for self-gratification or assurance of personal salvation. The purpose of new life that Christ brings is to share that life with the world, to foster the Reign of God in our everyday lives. The inspiration and wellspring of that is not compulsive activism of what we “ought” to be doing; it flows from a sense of who our true self is created to be. But naturally our true self, as we wait expectantly in the tomb and let God’s Spirit birth new life in us, will be inclined to serve the world. As our own souls are saved, we will invite others into a healthier place for themselves. This is the genius of where Rohr’s *Immortal Diamond* invites me.

**SELF IN RELATIONSHIP AND COMMUNITY**

There is yet another level of finding our self beyond individual self-discovery. The language of “self,” as it is popularly used in the personal development and spirituality sphere, can sound individuated and determined. Encouragement to discover my true self can parallel so many other voices in society that urge me to work out how I ought to set my own path and be my own person in terms of what is best for me and how I will be fulfilled. Becoming the individual person God has created me to be—rather than being driven by other pressures and expectations, from within or without—is part of the good news of Christianity. But it is not the complete picture. A large part of the gospel

---

invitation is to discover who we are in relationship to our community, in terms of church and the broader world. A healthy sense of self subsists within a culture and a community, where we belong and to whom we belong. Preoccupation with finding our “self,” when our understanding of that term is captive to individualism and interiority, will ironically leave us short of discovering the full potential of our self.

We find our “self” in community with others—through engagement with other humans and our world. This is more reflective of insights from the psychological sciences. As well as a personal self, there is also an interpersonal self (in relationship with others), a social self (as we identify with particular groups, for example a football team), and a communal self (when we understand our “self” is shared with others in the broader community of a town, country or the whole human community). Psychologists talk about multiple selves that are nested in different relationship systems. As Michael Frost explores in a recent book, we are most true to who we are when we are “incarnate,” embodied and in relationship with our neighbourhood and our neighbours. Frost discusses former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams’ critique of preoccupation with finding one’s true self as if an inner identity can be separated from an outer identity:

common to a good deal of contemporary philosophical reflection on human identity is the conviction that we are systematically misled, even corrupted, by a picture of the human agent as divided into an outside and an inside—a “true self,” hidden, buried, to be excavated by one or another kind of therapy.31

This is not to deny the importance of listening to our true self, but we listen as we engage in relationship and are aware of our self in relationship to community. I am inspired by the Community of Transfiguration in Geelong, south-west of Melbourne in Australia. Unique in the Baptist world they are a monastic community. Part of their spiritual journey has been exploring the shadow side of their individual selves over the years. Interestingly, they are starting also to deal with their communal shadow. They believe that that if the shadow side of spiritual tendencies is buried, rather than brought into the light to be healed, then it will be destructive and harmful for their community. Ray Simpson and Brent Lyons-Lee celebrate churches and especially the Community of Transfiguration for being willing to embrace “the shadow”:

31 Rowan Williams, On Christian Theology (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 239, see also 239–64; discussed in Frost, Incarnate, 111–12.
A church or a nation that is in denial about its past cannot become whole or fulfill its destiny. Those parts of our past that lie buried because they are unacceptable need to be acknowledged. Inasmuch as they are still in our gene pool and continue to fester in dysfunctional behavior patterns, they need also to be brought to God.32

Moving from our false self to our true self is a mark of maturity, typically part of mid-life transitioning as Rohr teaches.33 But moving beyond an individuated sense of self to an understanding of self-in-community is also a mark of maturity. This moving beyond individual soul saving is especially important for Christians in the Western world. There are things we could learn about this from more communal-oriented cultures. We could also go back to the Bible with this fresh lens. In what ways do the words of Scripture invite our souls to be saved, not just as individuals but as communities and individuals-in-community? The letters to the seven churches in Revelation addressed the churches corporately not as individuals. The challenge and invitation was for their corporate spirituality to grow in more life-giving and gospel-consistent directions.

This is why I want to extend Rohr’s invitation to search for my true self, and go beyond it to also embrace a search—together with my faith community—for our true self. Who am I in my self? But also who am I in relationship with others? And who are we as a faith community when and if we are being most true to our “self” as the community God calls us to be?

CONCLUSION

*Immortal Diamond* is a thought-provoking book from many angles. Rohr does not hold back in criticising the ways in which traditional religious practice can keep people distant from God. He addresses atonement theories and questions why violence was necessary. He affirms the reach of God’s grace with a universalist tendency and a reflection on how all creation including animals may be resurrected. His writing is often more reflective and meditative than logical and highly structured. But his is a deeply inviting book that is worth reflecting on for the sake of the reader’s own soul, which is Rohr’s main focus. And it is also worth reading with missional questions in mind, concerning how its perspectives can help encourage

---


Darren Cronshaw, *Saving Souls and Listening Hearts: Implications for Missional Leaders from Richard Rohr’s “Immortal Diamond”* 253
spiritual awakening in others and revitalization in churches. I have sought to redeem the term “soul saving,” drawing on Rohr’s invitation to move from our false self to our true self. Saving souls starts with us, but it is also a gift—not a burden—to our churches and to people outside the life of our churches. It presupposes a listening heart.

The invitation of Immortal Diamond is to listen for our own true self. By extension, it is helpful to adopt a high view of people made in the image of God and to listen for what God is doing in the lives of people around us, whether they identify with Christian faith or not. It is also important to listen to local cultures and be attentive to what God is saying in the midst of them. For congregational revitalization, furthermore, listening to the soul and story of a church will help it discover its true self, and where necessary let its false self die a natural death. This is a lesson at many levels we can learn from creation; death is a natural part of the cycle of life. Finally, the essence of our “true self” will not emerge just by listening and being attentive to our own individual self. We need relationships and communities in order to discover different parts of our self. Thus offering our listening hearts to others is an important part of saving souls and helping them find their selves, but it will also help us find our selves as people in community.
Immortal Diamond (whose title is taken from a line in a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem) explores the deepest questions of identity, spirituality, and meaning in Richard Rohr's inimitable style. Spirituality. All categories. Home. Audiobooks. Spirituality. Book Actions. Richard Rohr, OFM (born 1943), is an American author, spiritual writer, and Franciscan friar based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church in 1970. PBS has called him "one of the most popular spirituality authors and speakers in the world." Rohr was born in Kansas in 1943. He received his master's degree in theology in 1970 from the University of Dayton. He entered the Franciscans in 1961 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1970. He became founder Richard Rohr's Immortal Diamond did this to me. What changed? Rohr reframed the story of Jesus' "the Christian story" as an invitation for human transformation. Writing this makes it sound obvious, but the real implications are huge, for Christians and everyone who has to live in our pseudo-Christian culture. To Rohr, birth, death, and resurrection aren't just I can't remember the last time I finished a book, thought to myself, â€œI will never be the same again,â€œ and began rereading to figure out why. Richard Rohr's Immortal Diamond did this to me. Such a mind and soul stretching work from Richard Rohr. There are quotable quotes on nearly every page, and I found myself doing a lot of note taking and journaling to soak up the insights. Do I agree with everything he says? Rohr claims that the German term for Trinity means â€œthree infoldingsâ€œ; the term he cites is not the common term in German (it is archaic); and it no more has this implication than we do if we use the term â€œthreelfoldâ€œ. This careless compilation of Sunday-school errors and wishful thinking permeates Rohr's use of Scripture as well. I began following Richard Rohr a few years ago and found him refreshing and speaking into my life where I was at, at the time. Although they were too polite to say so I probably annoyed my youth leaders/ministers with my constant questions about universalism and matters of orthodoxy. I also started engaging in debate online around this time, and I can credit Velvet Elvis with initiating some of that.