

Reality Initiating Us: Part One / **Lesson Four: You Are Not In Control**

Thursday, April 2, 2020 / Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

<https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/2020/04/>

Click here to listen to Richard Rohr introduce this week's Daily Meditation theme on "Reality Initiating Us," addressing our current global crisis as a collective initiation experience which we are all undergoing.

At some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender had a goal. —Dag Hammarskjöld

To be in control of one's destiny, job, or finances is nearly an unquestionable moral value in Western society. The popular phrase "take control of your life" even sounds mature and spiritual. It is the fundamental message of nearly every self-help book. On a practical level, it is true, but not on the big level. Our bodies, our souls, and especially our failures teach us this as we get older. We are clearly not in control, as this pandemic is now teaching the whole planet. It is amazing that we need to assert the obvious.

Learning that we are not in control situates us correctly in the universe. If we are to feel at home in this world, we have to come to know that we are not steering this ship. That teaching is found in the mystical writings of all religions. Mystics know they are being guided, and their reliance upon that guidance is precisely what allows their journey to happen. We cannot understand that joy and release unless we've have been there and experienced the freedom for ourselves.

In my life I have found the mystic teachings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) helpful for living into this truth. She was a master teacher who was never afraid of presenting humiliating evidence about herself. She called this her "little way." As she so brilliantly put it, "If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, you will be for [Jesus] a pleasant place of shelter." [2] What gives religion such a bad name is that most religious people are eager to be pleasing to themselves, and want to be a part of a "big way."

Being willing to be "displeasing to ourselves," or to allow our autonomous ego's needs to take a back seat to the larger field of love, is part of what it means to not be in willful control. Gerald May (1940–2005), one of my own teachers, very helpfully contrasts willingness with willfulness:

Willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering-into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process. In contrast, willfulness is a setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence. [1]

For many of us, this may be the first time in our lives that we have felt so little control over our own destiny and the destiny of those we love. This lack of control initially feels like a loss, a humiliation, a stepping backward, an undesired vulnerability. However, recognizing our lack of control is a universal starting point for a serious spiritual walk towards wisdom and truth.

Please join me in trying to be faithful to that walk, even as we pray for God's mercy for those who suffer, and especially the most marginalized.

Gateway to Action & Contemplation:

What word or phrase resonates with or challenges me? What sensations do I notice in my body? What is mine to do?

Prayer for Our Community:

O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other's burdens and the weight of glory. Listen to our hearts' longings for the healing of our world. [Please add your own intentions.] . . . Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, amen.

[Listen to Fr. Richard read the prayer.](#)

Story from Our Community:

Help! is definitely on my tongue as a one-word prayer when I can't form coherent words. Help! is what I am asking for, as I face an unpleasant future, that is preceded by a couple of very unpleasant years. Help! came on time; [I] am still hurting, grieving this loss of [a] hoped for, dreamed about, new future, but am reminded to hang in there and yell out from the depths of my soul, Help! -F. Ngunjiri

[Share your own story with us.](#)

[1] Gerald May, *Will and Spirit* (Harper & Row: 1982), 6.

[2] Thérèse of Lisieux, Christmas letter to Sister Geneviève (December 24, 1896). See *Collected Letters of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Sheed and Ward: 1949), 265. Adapted from Richard Rohr, [*Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation*](#), (Crossroad Publishing Company: 2004), 67–68, 70.

Epitaph from Dag Hammarskjöld, Journal entry (Whitsunday, 1961), *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden (Alfred A. Knopf: 1964), 205.

Image credit: *Agony (The Death Struggle)* (detail), Egon Schiele, 1912, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.