

“Breathing Under Water: Step 5 Accountability Is Sustainability”
John 20:19-23

We have reached Step 5 on this journey with Richard Rohr of the spirituality of the 12 steps. After we have made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves, we are challenged to take Step 5 (screen) “Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” It is the natural progression from Step 4. After one learns about their shadow stuff, it is essential to bring that to full awareness by sharing it with God, self, and someone else. We need to experience the freedom of telling someone we trust about our shadow stuff and receiving a loving response or acceptance and grace. Richard Rohr writes (screen), “In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says, ‘If you bring forth that which is within you, it will save you. If you do not bring it forth, it will destroy you.’”

While sharing our wrongs with God or ourselves may be difficult, opening our souls to another human being can be very scary! It can also be tricky. Also, if you are on the receiving end of someone’s confession, how do you react? What is an appropriate response?

In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown deals with this very dilemma and gives solid advice on this knowing that “If we share our shame story with the wrong person, they can easily become one more piece of flying debris in an already dangerous storm.” Here is a clip of an interview she had with Oprah about the people we should not share with, which also shows us how we should not react to someone sharing with us: <https://youtu.be/s8Pp7QB6GrE>

She writes, “But here's the tricky part about sharing your story: You can't call just anyone...We want solid connection in a situation like this—something akin to a sturdy tree firmly planted in the ground. We definitely want to avoid the following:

1. The friend who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. She gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is awkward silence. Then you have to make her feel better.
2. The friend who responds with sympathy (“I feel so sorry for you”) rather than empathy (“I get it, I feel with you, and I've been there”). If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: “Oh, you poor thing.” Or, the incredibly passive-aggressive Southern version of sympathy, “Bless your heart.”
3. The friend who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. She can't help because she's too disappointed in your imperfections. You've let her down.
4. The friend who is so uncomfortable with vulnerability that she scolds you: “How did you let this happen? What were you thinking?” Or she looks for someone to blame: “Who was that guy? We'll kick his ass.”
5. The friend who is all about making it better and, out of her own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge that you can actually be crazy and make terrible choices: “You're exaggerating. It wasn't that bad. You rock. You're perfect. Everyone loves you.”
6. The friend who confuses connection with the opportunity to one-up you: “That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!”

This makes Step 5 ever so tricky, even though it is so essential to our healing and transformation. Jesus knew the importance of accountability and grace so in one of his final conversations with his disciples, he urged them to do the hard work of forgiving people. (Read John 20:19-23) The context of the story is really important. It took place on the evening of the same day when Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the other disciple had discovered that Jesus was resurrected. We are back in the time of darkness, and as we know, darkness and light are important themes in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the light that comes into the darkness of the world. One would expect the disciples to be rejoicing and celebrating after realizing that Jesus was resurrected. Instead, we find them meeting in a secret place with locked doors because they were afraid of the authorities. The fear of the crucifixion was still gripping their hearts. As Jesus appeared to them, he gave them the peace and courage they needed to let go of their fear and to continue his mission. I love the details of the story. Jesus got so close to them that he breathed on them. Today is Pentecost and we talk about the Holy Spirit as the breath of God.

They were afraid and hiding. They were not sure what the future was going to hold for them. Jesus gave them the power they needed through his very breath.

He gave them his breath/Spirit in order for them to find the power and courage to forgive sins, or in other words to restore the broken. The Greek word ἀφήμι is often translated “forgive,” especially when it is used in relation to “sin” (ἁμαρτία). Yet, a better translation of the word we usually translate as sin is “brokenness.” It is not just about moral or immoral behaviors; it is also about something deeper: Our sense of self and our shadow motivations and triggers. So Jesus was giving the disciples his very spirit to be able to heal and release the brokenness of others. Jesus saw his mission as the restoration and healing of his people and the whole world. He knew that love was the only force strong enough to bring restoration. Jesus also knew the importance of accountability and grace and so in this conversation in John 20 with his disciples, he urged them to do the hard work of forgiving/restoring people. Jesus knew the traditional pattern that only makes people more stuck. Richard Rohr present this pattern in his book *Breathing Under Water* in the following way (screen):

sin → punishment → repentance → transformation

He says that this pattern is not biblical, and it does not lead us to true transformation. He writes, (screen) “God resists our evil and conquers it with good...God shocks and stuns us into love. *God does not love us if we change, God loves us so that we can change.*” Rohr follows in what Jesus taught the disciples about wholeness, love, and grace to present this pattern (screen):

Sin → unconditional love → transformation → repentance

This is very challenging for us because we live in a world of retribution, punishment, and revenge. To look at our mission as restorers and healers who are nonjudgmental takes a power beyond ourselves; the very breath of God upon us. To find a friend or a guide who can provide that nonjudgmental presence is also so essential for our own healing. This call of Jesus to the disciples to restore others to wholeness is our own call. It is not limited to counselors or pastors. It is about each of us providing that empathetic presence to the people of our lives. So how do we respond to this call?

I believe that it is important for us to learn about empathy, whether we are being called to offer it or seek it; i.e., whether we are the ones seeking to help us with Step 5 or being the ones helping others with that step. Brené Brown gives very helpful points about this ability to offer empathy when someone is ready for Step 5. Here is a clip about empathy: <https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369Jw>

Here is a list of four essential empathy skills:

1. (screen -one slide) To see the world as others see it, or perspective taking: “One of the signature mistakes with empathy is that we believe we can take our lenses off and look through the lenses of someone else. We can’t...What we can do, however, is honor people’s perspectives as truth even when they’re different from ours...Perspective taking requires becoming the learner, not the knower.”
2. (screen) To be nonjudgmental: Staying out of judgment means being aware of where we are the most vulnerable to our own shame, our own struggle. The good news is that we don’t judge in areas where we feel a strong sense of self-worth and grounded confidence.
3. (screen) To understand another person’s feelings: Understanding emotions in others and communicating our understanding of these emotions require us to be in touch with our own feelings...Emotional literacy...is as critical as having language. When we can’t name and articulate what’s happening to us emotionally, we cannot move through it.
4. (screen) To communicate your understanding of that person’s feelings: Communicating our understanding of the emotions can feel like the biggest risk because we can get it wrong.

I would like to invite you at this time to turn to a small group of your neighbors and share with them what you find most exciting or challenging about this empathy and the call to restore brokenness.

We will close with a breathing prayer from Joyce Rupp. “Sit and be attentive to the patterns of your breathing, the natural movement of the inhalation and exhalation, the in and out rhythm of this physical gift of life. Enter into quiet meditation using the following breath prayer: Breathe in... the grace-filled, life-giving Spirit of the creator. Breathe out...this love to individuals, groups of people, creatures, to all on our planet who are in need of the Holy Spirit’s vibrant, transforming presence... Spirit of the Universe, Spirit of our hearts, we welcome you into our lives. Come visit the places within us where Love has yet to find a dwelling place. Breathe within all of our existence with the power of your transforming grace. We open our entire beings to you and thank you for the gift of your presence. Amen.”