

AN EXCERPT FROM  
***DISCOVERING FILMMAKING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE***

The deepest vocational question is not “What ought I to do with my life?” It is the more elemental and demanding — “Who am I? What is my nature?”

Father Richard Rohr, a contemplative and Franciscan priest

In my 20’s, I lived for the now. I had no plans to become a filmmaker. I had no plans, period.

Yet I had lived an adventurous life — I moved from Hawaii to Hollywood, found Jesus, worked for Jesus, and got a “divorce” from an artistic Jesus team. Still, life was a fog. A fog that began to clear when in my late 20’s a passion for the cinema began to grow — both how to watch movies as an art form and how to make films for my life’s work. I would go to college for six years and study film and learn the craft of writing. But at age 36, the question of *Who Am I* came.

It came through my therapist Rita Knipe, a Jungian psychologist who I had started seeing at age 36 and would continue seeing off and on for 12 years. She was not the first therapist I had seen, nor the last. But she was the one who lead me the deepest into my complexities and their origins. “Who are you?” she asked one day. No one had ever asked me that before.

With that question came a revelation that had never visited me before. Like other self-revelations, they were most often prompted by questions. Questions, rightly timed, I learned, are the doorways to consciousness, awakenings to growth and maturity, to insights and self-understanding. They make lights go on inside and cause the most important AHA’s that collectively lead you to knowing your true self.

Such as the time when I attended a Catholic Youth Organization luncheon. The details of that day — what we ate, what the speaker said, who I talked to that day — have long ago faded from memory, but not the question. Seated among other youth spread out throughout the room and with visiting priests, next to me was a handsome young priest who asked me, “What’s your name?” Simple question. “Stephanie,” I replied. His eyes brightened and he bellowed, “Stephanie! What a beautiful name. After St. Stephen.” I had never heard of St. Stephen. At age 10, I was about to receive my Catholic confirmation rites, and a new name would be given to me for that event. I had never given thought to my own birth name, let alone St. Stephen’s. Later I would learn why Stephen became a saint. How his martyrdom came from being stoned to death as a follower of Christ in the days of the early Christian Church. How the skies above him opened at the time of his death as he forgave those who were stoning him. And how he saw “the glory of God” before he died.

“Your name Stephanie means ‘Crowned With Glory’,” the young priest revealed with a smile that I have never forgotten. In that smile, and in his revealing the meaning of my name, came a touch of joy I had never felt before — perhaps something sacred passing between us. And from that question, I lived with pride and a profound sense that, like Stephen, I was crowned with glory, even though at that young age I had no idea of what that meant. It would be something to discover to live into.

If there was ever a revelation that enlighten my path as a young adult, it came when I was in college and my friend Mike Hayes asked, “Why do you think I like you?” At the time, we were working on a publicity campaign for a media project that was coming to town. Mike had asked me to help out, since the job I had at the time was doing public relation and publicity. Our

friendship was young, as was our knowledge of each other. But when he asked me that question, my mind stuttered, my brain searched. I remember thinking, "How would I know?" And so my guessing began. "You like what I do and how I do it?" "I am doing a good job?" Mike just smiled. If he were bald, he would have looked like a smiling Buddha. "No Stephanie. I like you because I like you." What did that mean? It really didn't compute. Growing up in a family of nine, that question had never been asked, let alone that answer told to me. And so I just nodded, like I understood, only to have the years pass and his answer marinate. Eventually, I realized that the way to worthiness or acceptance was not performance but through grace freely given and a humility that realized my humanity and union with other humans. These would eventually come to me through spiritual union with something larger than what I did.

My therapist Rita's question, "Who are you?" reminded me of when Jesus asked a similar question to his disciples, to the men following him. "Who do you say I am?" Their guesses ranged from the reincarnation of John the Baptist to the long awaited Jewish Messiah. As his life revealed his identity, so do ours. We are revealed by what we do and how we be in the world. I am a writer, a journalist, a filmmaker, but my character is revealed by how I act towards others, and the word I give and keep.

Rita's unanswerable question in that moment left me speechless and revealed to me another dimension of life. My life by now should have been lived long enough to know the answer. At 36, I had been through three colleges, had a five-year career as a newspaper reporter, had travelled to at least a dozen countries for work, and was now in the middle of finishing my first documentary film which would go on to win a television EMMY in 1993.

So who was I? Who I am?

As if a white dove had descended from Heaven and had landed on my head, Rita said, “You are a vessel through which creativity wants to flow.” Silence came like an anointing. It wasn’t that she had said something foreign or strange, but that it fit! “That is me,” I thought. That is what my life has been, and is. Her pronouncement felt like an awakening, a naming, an enlightenment. It not only fit, but that day, even though I had been living this since I was in high school, I claimed it as my calling and destiny — to be a vessel, to let creativity flow through me. It was the day I felt my soul met its spirit, and a union that had begun long ago was now very present and enlivened.

For me, to live my calling or destiny is a marriage that binds the spirit of creativity with my spiritual essence, the place where my soul makes deeper meaning. It is what defines me and defines the work I have done. It is the gift that has been given to me by God, complete with the talent needed and the faith to live out a vocation no matter what, no matter the troubles at hand.

What this book is, is not a “how to” — how to make films. It is a story of light and dark, of surmounting obstacles, of living a challenging, sometimes desperate, journey for more than 30 years. In hindsight as I looked back to my beginnings and the arduous process of making some 10 documentaries and other videos, I now realize that I was living Filmmaking as a spiritual practice.

Every film I have created came from the Spirit of Creativity that wanted to flow through me. Every film has my spirituality at its core, not overtly but organically. As I said, this vocation, path, or practice, I believe, did not originate with me though it is within me. Inspiration, my talents, my success are gifts from God that called me to use them in service to him and to humanity. The inspiration for ideas, for knowing what film to create, for how to make these films

came from the Spirit of God, the Spirit that is. From that swirling, sacred wind that blows as it wills, that whispers to my soul to do this, try this, make this, I am a vessel that listens, that yields to Spirit and the soul-making gifts of Creativity. It is the only way I know how to make films with meaning and soul.

The stories in this book will unfold for you my life of filmmaking and an understanding of what making films as a spiritual practice is. Spiritual practice. What does that mean, you ask? I define it as a force of higher nature. It exists everywhere when Spirit and Creativity join with making art and humanity. There is something sacred in it and is an organic expression made of true desires and vision inspired by truth.