

ROSE'S KITCHEN

by AUGUST TURAK

After a lecture on Zen defies all of August Turak's expectations, he begins hanging around, trying to figure this wild, wonderful, West Virginia Zen Master out. One evening, a passing observation turns into an otherworldly encounter. In a few breathless moments, Turak faces his overwhelming fear and the tantalizing possibility of an all-or-nothing search for Enlightenment. This revelation compels Turak to drop out of college to become Richard Rose's first student.

I am at the end of my rope. I am nauseated by life; it is insipid, without salt and meaning. If I were hungrier than Pierrot I would not choose to eat the explanations people offer. One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world, it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought by a peddling shanghaier of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager? I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?

-Soren Kierkegaard

"I've spent my life tryin' to get a line on people and I still can't figure it," Richard Rose said, as if talking to himself. "Man is an isthmus between two oblivions. There's billions of years before he's born, and there's billions of years after he's dead. Each human being's a chess piece wedged between these two oblivions. Yet people are forever telling me they don't have time to dope it all out. They don't have time to find out what god or devil's runnin' this damn game of life by what rules and to what purpose."

It was late on a cold November afternoon in 1972, and I was sitting at the table in Rose's kitchen in Benwood, West Virginia, drinking myself half crazy with tea and waiting. I did that a lot. I was twenty years old, Rose was my first spiritual teacher, I was his first student, and I spent a lot of time just hanging around hoping he'd raise the dead and terrified he just might. Rose was not only a self-taught spiritual teacher, poet, family man, and violin player, but a bonafide West Virginia hill billy from just outside of Wheeling.

Several years earlier, Rose "let the air out" of one of the local hell raisers in a melee he always described as "the shoot out." A reporter, sent for an interview, described him as a "short, bald, and powerfully built man in his early fifties, with a round face, piercing blue eyes, and a determined looking aspect that seemed constantly in search of a brick wall through which to ram his cannonball-like head."

He went on to say he found Rose, "sitting in a chair on the front porch of his old farmhouse, guarded by a pair of dangerous looking old refrigerators, in hand-patched leather dress shoes that didn't match, with one pant leg rolled up higher than the other, drinking coffee from a mason jar."

Rose admitted in the retelling that the depiction was by and large accurate. Except for the refrigerators. "I had him buffaloed," he would say with mock seriousness and genuine glee. "Those refrigerators were beyond repair. My guards had long since moved on to the spirit world. They weren't dangerous enough to push a dead man off an outhouse." However, he also made no bones as to how he felt about "what that son of a bitch reporter was implying."

For a goodly portion of that November afternoon, Rose sat across from me at the table, seemingly oblivious to my presence, his “store-bought” reading glasses perched on his broad nose as he pored over the used car ads in the Green Tab as if they were sacred scripture. The Green Tab was one of those local bartering sheets that always depressed the hell out of me as I wondered what it was like to sit hopefully by the phone servicing an ad for a three-dollar “almost new” shower curtain. At the time, and from what I could tell, Rose’s main line of work was buying used cars he called “junkers” for \$300 and re-selling them for \$400.

Occasionally he would get lucky and buy a used school bus. He would strip the tires, wheels, and undercarriage for re-sale and perch the shell up on blocks out at his farm for additional storage capacity. Rose saved everything, even his left over cooking grease for handmade hand soap, and like every West Virginian I ever knew, his appetite for storage was inexhaustible.

Finally, he took off his glasses, stood up, grabbed his white-painted steel cup which had been designed for something else, and headed for the stove in search of another helping of his self-brewed coffee that he unfailingly described as “gasoline” and which he swore up and down was killing him by inches. It was in mid-stride that he commented, seemingly to no one, on isthmuses, oblivions, gods, games, and devils.

Rose carried his coffee back to the table, sat down, and proceeded to lard it with his two customary heaping teaspoons of sugar. He was reaching for his glasses again when I realized I’d been extended an invitation and grabbed it.

“I think people are just scared Mr. Rose. They’re afraid we can’t know anything for sure so why get started on a hopeless task.”

“Do you know *that* for sure?” Rose said, neatly switching pronouns and reading my mind. “Because if you’re *sure* you can’t know anything for sure then you’re sure about one thing. And if you’re sure

about one thing then maybe you can be sure about two, and if two is possible then it stands to reason that maybe, just maybe, you can be sure about *everything*. The agony of life is uncertainty and the rationalization is that uncertainty is certain. What people really want is the *Truth*. Something you can take to the bank. Something that won't crap out on you when you're up against it like the wet bottoms to fifty-pound paper feedbags when you got starving cattle on your hands. When you're dyin' for instance."

"If everyone wants the Truth what's holding them back?"

"The simple fact that they don't want the truth," Rose said. He paused long enough to grin at the bewilderment spreading over my face. "They're scared all right, you got that much right. But what they're scared of is not the *impossibility* of finding the Truth -- that's the excuse -- but the *possibility* that they will find it."

"I don't understand."

"They want the truth as long as it turns out to be what they want and flatters their ego. Truth is a wonderful thing, at the end of the road it's the *only* thing, but it don't work that way. What they're scared of is all the small 't' truths they'll have to face along the way to capital 'T' Truth."

"I still don't understand."

"OK. Let's say me and you was to take a notion and go out to the farm and build a contraption that will tell all the men in this country once and for all whether their wives love them or not. I'm talkin' real love here, the genuine article. So much of what people *call* love is like a whore on Sundays -- selfishness all dressed up and made respectable courtesy of self-deception. Then we haul our gizmo down and offer our services at a nickel a shot. We'd be out of business in no time.

What we'd do is paralyze them. They'd be dying to know and terrified to find out. Checkmate. The human pawn wedged again between the irresistible force of their desire for truth, and the immovable object of what it might turn out to be. So they'd rush off to the bar and the football game hoping the whole damn problem will just go away while their backs turned. If you turn your back and hope it goes away enough, it becomes a habit. Eventually that's what you *become*, that's *who you are*. You *become* Untruth.

That's what conversion is all about. The word 'conversion' comes from the Latin for 'turn back.' It's a clockwise process of continually turning into the truth instead of away from it, and you do this turning one tough decision at a time. Most folks is living their lives counterclockwise the way I see it. "

Rose reached for one of the sweet rolls he bought day old and four dozen at a time. "Think about it," he said, munching away. "It's all around you. There's a million people out there right now who know they should see a doctor but are scared to make an appointment. A million wives who want to know where their husbands were last night but are so afraid to ask they pretend they don't. And you're surprised there's billions of people who want to invite God into their home but are afraid of the mess he'd find?"

The Truth *will* set you free but it ain't *your* truth. You got to want it for its own sake and damn the consequences. Most of humanity just doesn't have the stomach for that kind of trip."

Pausing and without explanation, Rose got up and sifted inconclusively around the room for a minute or so, then opened the door and vanished down his dark, unheated hallway, only to re-emerge carrying the biggest ring of keys I have ever seen. I was astonished both by its magnitude and the memory such an assortment of unmarked keys required. However, it also seemed vaguely appropriate that a man who had spent his life unlocking the secrets of the universe would own just such a set of keys.

Sitting back down he shuffled through the members of this club until he came to a long, narrow, old-fashioned skeleton key that he patiently and deliberately removed from its large brass ring.

As I tried to imagine what “key” to the human predicament, the universe, or me he was about to illustrate, he inserted the skeleton end into the canal of his right ear and began scratching vigorously while picking up just where he left off.

“It all comes down to this. You can either huddle in the cave of illusion and wishful thinking or start tunneling out. You can either live and die like a dog, or set yourself to finding out why dogs live and die. People are forever saying that they’re afraid of wasting their lives on such a project. That’s utter bullshit. They don’t know who they are, where they came from, or where they’re going when they die. They settle for a lick and a promise in hopes the guy on the white horse will pull up on their deathbeds.

They scatter precious life force to the four winds vainly trying on one distraction after another. They try on distractions like new suits of clothes, forever hoping their latest little pleasure will somehow turn the trick and either fill that empty hole deep in their guts or help them forget it’s there.

They never slow down long enough to realize the empty spot they’re tryin’ to forget is precious. It’s Truth trying to get their damn fool attention. As for filling that hole, they have about as much chance of filling up that cavity with the produce of Mother Earth as an oyster has of dislodging a grain of sand inside its shell by wrapping it with pearl. It only makes the irritation worse.

By the time they hit forty they’re burnt out, dead tired, and it’s beginning to dawn on them that Death has ‘em in his crosshairs. By now they’re finding it damn hard to believe *anything* will turn the trick. So they settle for drowning out the background noise of nameless regret with booze, blaring televisions, and hoping against hope that their children don’t end up like them. Even if they turn to religion they don’t want the Truth. They want reassurance, a magic word, nostrum, or Sunday emotion that will mask full time pain with part-time effort. They’re still not willing to consider that Truth might be calling from deep inside that pain. They’re still not ready to face it, to face themselves, to *change*.

Freud was an atheist but he had one thing right. He said most folks don't *live*, they are merely *lived*. They're lived by their passions, fears, and rationalizations and they call that living. The way I look at it, that ain't living. It's death propped up in a chair."

Suddenly, Rose seemed to catch himself, he glanced at the wall clock which read 5:15, muttered "damn" under his breath, and lurched across the room to his ancient coat hanger adorned, black and white television precariously perched on the counter. He flicked it on, turned off the sound, and returned to his chair. Rose, always the gambler, was betting once again that by the time the local news came on at six that broken down tube would be warm enough to produce a picture.

While otherworldly in so many ways, Rose was keenly interested in what was going on locally, even to the point of occasionally strolling up to a nearby bar just to sip a Coke and load up on gossip. The only television I ever saw him watch was the six o'clock news, and the only compensation for his guidance he would ever accept was the occasional copy of the *Wheeling Intelligencer* I pretended to buy for myself.

As for me, I needed the respite that fickle television had just afforded. Once again, Rose had hit every button and left my head spinning as I tried to fight off his uncanny knack for launching into general rants that ended up hitting me so damn personally. What made him particularly effective was the utterly flat, emotionless way that he delivered these tirades. I was angry at his depressing analysis or maybe just angry with him for making me so depressed. Could things really be that bleak?

As these clouds cleared and the room came back into focus, I noticed that Rose was staring at me and had been for the last few moments. As I squirmed, his bright, blue eyes began to twinkle, "I know, I know," he began in perfect seriousness except for those eyes. "I'm a mean and terrible man who can't wait for quittin' time so I can get back to pushing all the baby ducks I can find backwards in the water."

With this his lips began to twitch and giving it up as a bad job he burst into one of his fits of hysterical laughter that always left him doubled over with crisscrossed arms holding onto his rounded belly, apparently for all of dear life. Despite my best efforts I couldn't resist the bastard. The next thing I knew we were goading each other into spiraling round robin outbursts of laughter until we were merely laughing at each other laughing at each other as the tears ran down our cheeks.

No matter how serious things ever got Rose and I always found or created hundreds of excuses for these laughing fits. Rose was even fond of telling people that these episodes were the real reason I hung around. But as he shook his head in mock disappointment, his twinkling eyes were always on mine, and I will never forget the deep affection those eyes conveyed.

"Well, well," a slowly recovering Rose finally said, eyes still a twinkle. "A few randomly tossed bricks hit a few carefully guarded stained glass windows, I reckon. Can't you see that I have to give you a headache if I want to sell you my aspirin?"

"What are you selling, Mr. Rose?" I said, still thinking he was kidding around.

"I come to you as a man selling air,
And you will think twice at the offer and price,
And you will argue that nothing is there,
Although we know that it is -- everywhere."

Rose tossed off these improvised lines so quickly and spontaneously -- as if we'd been rehearsing this skit forever -- that I was stunned. But he didn't seem to notice. He hesitated, his face softened, and no longer looking at me, his eyes took on a deep, blue, dreamy cast.

"Wonderful things..." he finally whispered after a long pause and with deep emotion. "Wonderful things... I want to sell you wonderful things." Then his eyes glazed over altogether, and he was far away.

"You know I was in Egypt once," he said softly after a few moments. "They told me some guy named Carter discovered King Tut's tomb still sealed. Well, he chiseled a head and shoulders sized hole in that seal deep underground. Then he shoved in a lantern, stuck in his head and froze. The fellow behind him couldn't take it and got to screaming, 'What do you see? For God's sake man what do you see?' Carter didn't move a muscle, but his answer wafted out and echoed back through that tomb like a voice from the other side. 'I see wonderful things.'"

Again he hesitated. Then, turning to me, he said, "The simple fact is I've seen wonderful things. Things I can't convey in words and things you can't imagine. And I'm so damn grateful that the only reason I'm still draggin' this slowly rotting carcass of mine around is on the off chance that you and maybe a few like you might through my help and the grace of God see those wonderful things too."

His eyes were again filled with tears but this time of a different sort, and a realization welled up in me from the deepest part of my being. It welled up in wave after wave until the lump in my throat was so big I could scarcely breathe. I wanted to see these wonderful things he was selling. I wanted these wonderful things more than I had wanted or ever would want anything in my entire life. Even if it killed me.

Suddenly, the mood shifted again, and so help me God something luminous appeared on Rose's face. Here was a different man or, perhaps, a vessel for something more than man, and when I realized the direction my mind was taking I was terrified. The tension was so intense that all I wanted to do was let go and cry my heart out. Yet something was holding me back. I hadn't cried in ten years, and I wasn't going to do so now. Instead, like a Hebrew in the desert, I mentally cried out for Moses to veil his face.

This second realization, so opposite and hard on the heels of the first, stunned me even more. I clenched my teeth, focused my attention on the teacup I was strangling in my hands, and fought like a tiger to regain control.

I can't say how much time went by, but gradually I regained my precious composure and lifted my eyes. A normal Rose was still sitting across from me, his eyes focused on his short stubby fingers loosely interlocked in his lap. He was just sitting -- that artless, effortless kind of sitting that is the achievement of a lifetime and impossible to fake.

Finally, summoning all my courage, I whispered. "What do I need to know? What do I have to do?"

"OK," he said blandly. "Here it is. First I'll give you the facts and then the formula. Ready? There is a God or Absolute Truth, and he knows what he's doing. And there's a little piece of him in you, and your job and reason for being here is to bring that to the surface and *become* it. It's like the difference between potential electricity and actual. Faith is the potential and realization the actual. I call the realization Enlightenment, but every religion's got its own name for it or for that matter you can make up your own -- it don't matter. But when God gets you by the hair you'll know it. That much I promise. It'll take you to your knees, it's that drastic, but that's OK because you'll be just where you need to be to start sayin' thanks. And if you spend the rest of your life in that position you'll still feel like you never got started. And from that need to say thanks will come an overwhelming need to help a world that first and foremost don't want your definition of help. But you'll try anyway even if they kill you for it.

But here's the catch. Like I keep saying, always remember that I'm just a bald headed bastard from West Virginia with one pant leg rolled up higher than the other drinking coffee from a mason jar. You can't take my word for it, or anyone else's for that matter. You got to take the trip yourself. Sure, maybe I got some pointers for you that will keep you from spinnin' your wheels on the way up the mountain, and if a hillbilly like me appeals to your intuition, I might inspire you to throw your shoulder a little harder at the door. But there's no substitute for climbing up that mountain yourself and taking a look around.

In this business, second hand information is worse than none. There's always the chance you'll sit down on another man's word and call it faith. Hell, that ain't faith; that's belief. Faith ain't in words and

concepts, faith's what gets you climbing and keeps you climbing. And, hell, you really don't even need much of that to get started. All you need from the get go is the faith that you can be a little less stupid about life than you already are and take it from there.

Now, here's the formula. It's simple to say and hard to do. You got to attack the gates of heaven with everything you have. You got to go after it hammer and tongs like your hair was on fire. Spiritual work by definition is anything that increases your addiction to Truth and lessens your addictions to anything else. Face all those little truths along the way no matter where they lead. Attack those heavenly gates with an axe or anything else handy to the job. But here's the catch," and he smiled. He smiled the only really beatific smile I've ever seen. "You will fail."

"You'll fail because those gates don't swing in they only swing out, and you can't force your way in -- you're only invited. You need some help from the other side because ultimately, you can't do it alone. But in your defeat you will surrender, and with your total surrender the doors magically swing open. Mystics call it the Magnificent Defeat.

But don't get any ideas. You can't just decide to surrender goin' in and skip all the work. You have to go through it. You got to *transcend* work not skip it. We don't consciously surrender. It happens to us when we're fought out in the most noble cause there is. It *happens* to us when we realize, once and for all, the utter futility in trying to boot strap ourselves into heaven. You gotta be like a stage actor. He has to work like hell, maybe for years, just to finally be able to let go and act natural."

"All human beings want the Truth," he continued. "The degree of difference between them is whether they realize it, how much energy they put into it, and how systematically they apply that energy. As above so below. It ain't all that much different from startin' a business. You make a commitment, learn everything you can on the subject, surround yourself with the best like-minded people you can find, burn your bridges behind you, and stop at nothing short of evil to get there. This business called spirituality has only one product but it comes in three colors -- service to others, selflessness, and the longing for That Which IS.

"Does you're product guarantee results, Mr. Rose? Will I make the top of the mountain? Does it come with a money back guarantee?" I said, trying to hide my anxiety behind levity.

"I guarantee nothing concerning Enlightenment," Rose said flatly yet vehemently. "What I neglected to tell you is all the other million and one parts to this formula that ain't no formula. Let's lump 'em all together and call 'em grace. What I know and you gotta find out is this: This is God's sand box, and in the end he's calling ALL the shots. Believe me, I have no standing with the man upstairs. Hell, for all we know maybe we don't seek grace, but only seek because we're graced.

All we do is what every businessman does. Play the odds. We work like hell to increase probabilities. But even the businessman needs grace to turn probabilities into success. He just calls it luck. But they'll all tell you the harder they work the luckier they get. You might say the whole damn spiritual path is nothing more than learning how to let grace happen. It's learning the habit of becoming accident-prone.

But I will guarantee this. Either way, you'll know you've spent your life a hell of a lot less foolishly than you would otherwise. You'll know your shoulder has been to the wheel of the most noble undertaking there is. And if you stick to it, this work will transform that guy you see in the shaving mirror into a good, decent, honest, compassionate human being who can make good decisions, see them through, and damn the consequences. In other words it'll make a man out of you, and that ain't too shabby."

Then his voice softened again.

"But when you get tired and discouraged and start feeling sorry for yourself, try to remember one thing. If you think you are working hard to find God, you have no idea how hard God is working to find you."

BIOGRAPHY

A famous Zen maxim teaches that we must turn our ordinary life into our spiritual life, and August Turak reveals the secret for doing just that. Turak integrates an intense, life-long interest in spiritual experience, with a highly successful career as an executive, entrepreneur, and sales and marketing professional. After selling one of his companies in 2000, Turak retired from full-time business in order to teach others how to transform ordinary life experiences into spiritual opportunities rather than obstacles. Through hundreds of stories, examples, and metaphors drawn from his successful career, Turak's teaching gains a down to earth grittiness that makes complex spiritual ideas easy to understand and refreshingly entertaining as well.



A charismatic and highly sought out speaker and seminar leader, Turak was awarded a Coolidge Fellowship from *Cross Currents* magazine and most recently won the \$100,000 Grand Prize in the Templeton Foundations *Power of Purpose Essay Contest*. He is currently writing a book based on his award winning essay *Brother John* on the life changing lessons Turak learned from the monks at a Trappist monastery that are readily applicable to all.

Besides teaching and writing, Turak is pursuing a graduate degree in theology, continues to take long retreats with the monks of Mepkin Abbey, and manages his 75 acre cattle farm outside Raleigh, North Carolina.

Turak has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Fast Company*, *Selling Magazine*, the *New York Times*, and in various other publications and media.