

I'm tired of talking about a pandemic. I'm tired of perpetual planning for how to try to serve the parish through this – especially because every time we come up with a plan – we have to tweak it because of new information or new realities. I'm ready for something easy, something fun.

But we don't get to choose these things in life. But we DO get to choose how we will react to the sufferings/challenges, and pains of life.

James Hillman suggests that it is our inferiorities, sufferings and struggles that build up our souls. He says that it not our strengths that give us depth and character, but our weaknesses.

Odd as it seems, more of us are rendered superficial by our successes than by our failures, more of us are torn apart by our strengths than by our weaknesses. Why is this true?

Fr. Richard Rohr has suggested that we often grow up -- by falling apart. A renowned Polish psychologist, Casmir Dabrowski was once asked "Can't we also grow by being built up by our successes, by our strengths?" And he answered: "Theoretically, yes; we can grow through our successes just as easily as we can through our failures. But I can say this, through more than 40 years of psychiatric practice – I have rarely seen it. Almost always deep growth takes place through the opposite – our deaths, our losses, our dark nights of the soul."

In the end, it is our struggles, our weaknesses, failures, sufferings, disappointments and losses that build up our souls. They give us depth.

And we think about this pandemic. People are becoming frustrated, angry, and lashing out. That's not the path of a disciple of Christ. We have something to learn from COVID-19, a possibility of a new depth of soul. It is possible that we could actually come out of this as more compassionate people, more generous and loving people, people who bring good things and good news to those around us. But it's a tough journey to get there.

Any of us can appreciate this if we think and pray about it a bit. What has made us deep persons? What has taught us compassion? Our successes? The things we have been praised for? Those qualities of mind or body which make us superior to others? That perfect body that everyone envies us for? That athletic achievement that is one-in-a-million? That *summa cum laude* that was the envy of our classmates? That perfect home or yard that is the envy of our neighbors? Have these given us soul? Are these what make us interesting?

No. Our souls have depth, strength, compassion and interest for others when they have been shaped by something quite different: the fear that we will grow old and look homely like an uncle, that shame that I feel because my teeth aren't straight, the birthmark I can't hide, the blemishes that set me apart, the fat around my waist and hips that humbles me, the fear that I am not smart enough, not interesting enough, that my background isn't good enough, my plain and simple inadequacies. All of these coupled with the humiliations I have endured, in my marriage and in my family that I am powerless to do anything about, the insults and taunts I received on the playground as a child, my drunken stepfather, a virus that has gripped us in fear – these are what give us depth of soul. A pandemic offers us the same opportunity. But we have to CHOOSE to go deeper. It does not happen automatically.

It is not that any of these things are, in and of themselves, good; it is just that when we listen to them – face them – deal with them – we grow deep. They build up our souls.

All of these things are not things to be cured from, things to be solved, things to be ignored, things to be buried as private and past shames. Thank God that a pandemic comes around only occasionally in decades. But like all of these other things, it needs to be listened to, prayed over. All of these are possible entries into the depth of our souls.

It was in the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross that God spoke His most important word to the world – His immense love, poured out in His own blood. And it is in our own powerlessness that God speaks to us at this moment of our history. Do not lose hope! Amen. (freely adapted from Rolheiser, August 22, 1994)

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