

This pandemic has been a long slog. And it appears that the slog will continue until a vaccine has been widely distributed. When I realize that, I feel weary. I WANT THIS TO END. AND RIGHT NOW!

But neither God nor pandemics seem to ever work on my timeline. I came across this piece last week that was a word of encouragement in understanding my varied responses to our current moment in history. Somedays I feel like I'm managing pretty well; other times, not so much.

The piece, written by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, suggests that we have a need for 3 kinds of spiritualities to get through life. What follows is my summary of what he wrote.

We all struggle in 3 ways. First, we struggle simply to maintain ourselves, to stay healthy and stable, to stay normal, to not fall apart, to not have our lives unravel into depression. It takes a lot of effort just to maintain our ordinary health, stability, and happiness *in ordinary times*.

But even as this is going on, another part of us is forever reaching upwards, struggling to grow, to achieve higher things, to not waste the gifts God has given us, to live a life that is more admirable, noble, and altruistic – more like Christ's.

Then, at a third level, we struggle with a threatening darkness that surrounds us and undermines us. The complexities of life can overwhelm us, a pandemic can make us feel threatened. We can feel small, helpless, and insignificant. For this reason, a part of us is forever conscious that we are one season, one breakdown, one illness, one lost relationship, one lost job, one death of a loved one, or one thing that we cannot even foresee, away from a descent into depression, illness, or a chaos we cannot manage.

In short, we struggle to maintain ourselves, struggle to grow, and struggle to keep depression and death at bay. Because we struggle at these 3 levels, we need 3 kinds of spiritualities in our lives.

At one level, we need a spirituality of maintenance – one that helps us to maintain our normal health, stability, and ordinary life. Exercise, daily prayer, devotional reading, long walks, time with friends, some times of joy and relaxation. These are often not given much emphasis in discussions of spirituality. Yet they are essential. We are not always ready to hear yet another challenge to grow. We know that time will come, but we cannot live perpetually in that mode – it's simply too exhausting.

There are times in our lives, when the best we can do is to hang on, not fall apart, and fight to regain again health, stability, and strength, to simply get one foot in front of the next. At these times, challenge isn't what we need. We need to be given divine permission to feel what we're feeling and we need to be given a warm hand to help draw us back towards health and strength. The challenge to grow comes later.

And that challenge comes with an invitation that invites us upwards, towards a spirituality of ascent. All spiritualities worthy of the name, stress the need to make ascent, to grow beyond our immaturities, our laziness, our wounds, and the perennial hedonism, greed, and shallowness of our culture. The emphasis here is always to reach upward, beyond, towards the heavens, and towards all that is good, true and beautiful. Much of classical Christian spirituality is a spirituality of ascent, an invitation to be true to what is deepest inside of us, namely the Image and Likeness of God. Much of Jesus' preaching invites us precisely to something higher. Pope John Paul II used this very effectively in his appeal to young people challenging them to not settle for compromise or second-best, but to look for something higher and more noble to give their lives to.

But the challenge to grow also needs a spirituality of descent, a vision and discipline that points us not just towards the rising sun, but also towards the setting sun. We need a spirituality that doesn't avoid or deny the complexities of life, the mad conspiracy of forces beyond us, the challenging losses and depressions in life, and the reality of sickness, diminishment, old age, and death. Sometimes we can only grow by descending into that frightening darkness, where, like Jesus, we undergo a transformation by facing chaos, diminishment, darkness, pandemic, and death itself. As Christians we call this undergoing the Paschal Mystery. All spirituality worth its name will, at some time in life, invite us to make a painful descent into the darkness. There is no way to avoid this. It simply comes with life itself.

Life reveals itself above us and below us and on the flat plain of ordinariness. None of these may be ignored. And so we need always to maintain and steady ourselves, even as we reach upwards and sometimes allow ourselves to descend into darkness.

And there's still time to do all of this. As Rainer Marie Rilke once wrote:

You are not dead yet. It is not too late

To open your depths by plunging into them.

And drink in the life

That reveals itself quietly there.

(Rolheiser, daily posting of 27 October 2014)