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Infinite Horizon

The Prairie Spirituality of Ronald Rolheiser

Michael W. Higgins August 27, 2014 - 4:10pm



It is always oppressively hot in San Antonio, Texas. At least it was when I taught there, at the Oblate School of Theology, for three consecutive Junes between 2011 and 2013. Although my graduate classes took place in air-conditioned lecture rooms, eventually I had to venture outside and make my sweat-drenched way to my living quarters. Often I stopped at the modest bungalow that housed the school's president, Ronald Rolheiser, OMI—priest, educator, retreat-giver, and spiritual writer. He is, in fact, one of the most popular Catholic spiritual writers and syndicated columnists at work today. Hospitable and jolly, Rolheiser would replenish my dehydrated body with ample refreshments and my spirit with the balm of his insights, and then we'd watch the opening monologue of his favorite late-night talk show, laughing heartily whether the jokes were funny or not. For me it was always a welcome respite in a day of academic toil and oppressive heat.

Rolheiser is one of the three most prominent Oblates in the country, along with Cardinal Francis George of Chicago and George F. McLean, professor emeritus of philosophy at Catholic University of America. The author of many bestsellers and award-winning books, Rolheiser is easily the most visible and accessible of the three. Although he has led the Oblate School of Theology for nine years, Texas is not native ground for Rolheiser; he hails from the prairies of Saskatchewan. Born in 1947 in Cactus Lake, some two miles from the Alberta border, he grew up on a farm, one of a large brood of Rolheisers. His parents were of Russian and German stock, and his family life, he says, consisted of the “best of the pre-Vatican II church.” Faith played an important role in the cementing of the family's values. Rolheiser considers his father “the most moral man I have ever met,” and the roots of his own faith and morality are embedded in his family life and rustic upbringing.

It has been a long odyssey from backwoods Saskatchewan. Life there held many consolations, but in the end, conscious that he was not exactly a farmer-in-the-making, and possessed of a keen religious sensibility, Rolheiser decided to follow an older brother and join the missionary order known as the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The Oblates were ubiquitous in his part of the country, where diocesan priests were a rarity

and Jesuits the only other alternative. Following his time as a novice and scholastic, Rolheiser did undergraduate studies at the University of Ottawa in philosophy, followed by postgraduate work in theology at Newman Theological College in Edmonton, the University of San Francisco, and the University of Louvain. His doctoral dissertation was on the philosophical proofs of the existence of God and was published in part in his 1994 book *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering the Felt Presence of God* [2].

On his return to Canada in 1974, Rolheiser taught systematic theology at Newman for thirteen years. During that period—in 1977, to be precise—he discovered St. John of the Cross, whose writings would have a transformative effect on his thinking, theological priorities, and ultimately his vocation. Rolheiser already knew of the Carmelite mystic and poet, of course, but now he began to teach him, and as he did he discovered layers of meaning and personal connection that reverberate to this day. In his hugely popular and award-winning *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* [3], Rolheiser paraphrases the Sanjuanist definition of spirituality as “the attempt by an individual or a group to meet and undergo the presence of God, others, and the cosmic world in such a way so as to come into a community of life and celebration with them.” Prayer, mediation, liturgy, and Scripture study are the tools that enable us to enter into that presence.

John of the Cross might not at first glance appear a natural draw for a shy prairie Oblate, and initially, trained in philosophy and systematic theology, Rolheiser showed little indication of a mystical bent. Two key figures, however, exposed him to John of the Cross—prominent theologians of different persuasions who nonetheless were drawn to his apophatic mysticism. One was Michael Buckley, SJ, who taught Rolheiser in a course on St. John; and the other was the Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey, who influenced him by way of his book *Naming the Whirlwind: Renewal of God Language*. [4] Rolheiser found in St. John a sensibility that was poetic rather than systematic, and the discovery helped him recognize that this was where his heart was as well—more comfortable with symbols and metaphors than with systems and syllogisms.

This sympathy with a sixteenth-century Spanish ascetic may have begun in an epiphany, but it has continued by means of an enduring devotion. St. John is more than an *idée fixe* for Rolheiser; he is an abiding presence. It is not only the poetic in John of the Cross that Rolheiser is drawn to; it is the love the Carmelite friar had for the perfect analogy, the mundane anecdote charged with meaning, the image suffused with divine love. Rolheiser admiringly writes of how St. John, explaining how a person can become inflamed with altruistic love,

uses the image of a log bursting into flame in a fireplace. When a green log is placed in a fire, it doesn't start to burn immediately. It first needs to be dried out. Thus, for a long time, it lies in the fire and sizzles, its greenness and dampness slowly drying out. Only when it reaches kindling temperature can it ignite and burst into flame. Speaking metaphorically, before a log can burst into flame, it needs to pass through a certain drying out, a period of frustration and yearning.

So, too, the dynamics of how real love is born in our lives. We can ignite into love only when we, selfish, green, damp logs, have sizzled sufficiently. And the fire that makes us sizzle is unfulfilled desire.

Buckley's influence was not limited to introducing Rolheiser to John of the Cross. His engagement with the intellectual challenges posed by atheism, and his attention to the conversation between science and religion, persuaded Rolheiser to drop his assaults on unbelief and look for common ground—and this he discovered by recognizing the truth of Buckley's observation that atheism feeds off bad religion, paradoxically ensuring that faith is well served by the non-believing. The non-believing "pick apart bad religion," Rolheiser would go on to write,

showing us our blind spots, rationalizations, inconsistencies, double standards, hypocrisies, moral selectivity, propensity for power, unhealthy fears, and hidden arrogance. Atheism shows us the log in our own eye.

Similarly, Gilkey's reflections on the ordinariness of sacred places, God's preference for the mundane world over the temple, and the interconnecting bonds of community and politics in the making of a just and genuinely "religious" society helped shape Rolheiser's conviction that his voice, like a journalist's, was best situated amid the messiness of daily human interactions. In time he decided to exercise his missionary vocation as a spiritual writer. He would continue to teach throughout the 1980s and '90s at Newman in Alberta, his popularity as a lecturer on the rise, his reputation as a retreat-giver spreading throughout Canada and the United States. Then the Oblates called him to new duties: from 1998 to 2004 he served in the general administration of his religious community, followed by his appointment in 2005 as president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, a position he holds to this day.

Though he never envisioned a life in administration, Rolheiser has adjusted to its demanding and lonely nature while maintaining his primary commitment to writing and spiritual direction. Rolheiser views the advance of secularism as the result of many things: not just individualism, relativism, or materialism—the papal troika of anathemas—but also our impoverished ecclesial response to God's eclipse. In *A Shrinking Horizon: The Deeper Reasons Underlying our Struggles to Believe in God in Western Culture* [5], he writes that "secular culture today constitutes a virtual conspiracy against interiority and belief in God." "This conspiracy is obviously not some conscious or deliberate thing, but a confluence of accidents now meeting in history which are making it difficult for us in the Western world to live the examined life," Rolheiser insists. "In the West, and within secularized cultures in general, we struggle to see things against an infinite horizon."

The "receding of Transcendence" has a complex historical and philosophical gestation, but its consequences are immediate and long-lasting. Rolheiser cites the "plague of cerebration" eloquently denounced by such disparate thinkers as Albert Camus and Thomas Merton, a crisis of imagination in which the shrinking or withdrawal of the

transcendent marks the triumph of William Blake's Urizen—the embodiment of conventional, constricting Reason—over inner vision and attention to mystery:

When one reduces the holiness of God, understanding substitutes itself for faith. Among other things, we lose our sense of awe because God is no longer conceived of as so “awe-ful” and frighteningly holy that, like Isaiah, we would want to purge our eyes, our lips, and all our senses with burning coals before approaching his holiness. We simply have less appetite for contemplating because we are convinced that there is nothing worth contemplating. Not very disguised in the contemporary mindset is the attitude that “we’ve already had a look and we know what’s there!” Psychological univocity domesticates the burning bush. And it is easy to keep one’s shoes on before a subdued fire.

At some point, Rolheiser became convinced that his role was to remove those shoes. In the process, he was determined to avoid replicating the facile judgments and exhortations of religious leaders who merely decry the decline of the spiritual and condemn the godless humanism of our time. To Rolheiser’s mind these are wasted efforts—and bad pastoral theology to boot. In his view, Catholicism must not succumb to the temptation of merely defending an ossified orthodoxy and hunkering down behind fortress walls. He forcefully rejects the notion that a smaller, purer church would be healthier, immune to the intellectual viruses that threaten to infect us. Indeed, he insists that a carefully pruned remnant church would in fact strangle the very essence of Catholicism. “The very word Catholic,” he reminds us in *Forgotten Among the Lilies: Learning to Love Beyond Our Fears* [6], “means universal, wide.”

It speaks of a comprehensive embrace. Its opposite, therefore, is narrowness, pettiness, lack of openness, sectarianism, provincialism, factionalism, fundamentalism and ideology.... Nikos Kazantzakis wrote: “The bosom of God is not a ghetto.” That is another way of saying that God has a Catholic heart—we must free ourselves from un-Catholicism, from fundamentalism and ideology which create a heart with just one room.

Although the papacy of Francis seems to promise a less rigid ecclesiology—one that might recapture a Catholic vision more capacious than that one room—Rolheiser fears that the legacy of the papal-centric, theologically timid Catholicism of the past three decades will take generations to overcome.

Rolheiser’s nonjudgmental approach to secularity and determination to accept modernity’s freedoms has brought him his fair share of criticism. One senior Canadian bishop of an influential metropolitan see has dismissed Rolheiser’s work as a futile or possibly dangerous exercise in rapprochement. This view is shared by others—traditionalist clergy and laity alike—including the past editor of Britain’s *Catholic Herald*, Dr. William Oddie. An influential convert from Anglicanism, Oddie insisted that Rolheiser’s columnist photo show him in a Roman collar, rather than in more casual dress.

But it didn't end with the donning of the collar. In 2007, following a column on the novelist Anita Brookner in which Rolheiser remarked that "the first task of a couple in marriage is to console each other for the fact that they cannot not disappoint each other," Oddie fulminated that "Fr. Rolheiser should stick to what he is supposed as a priest and religious to know about, i.e., the wisdom of the Christian spiritual tradition. When it comes to peddling bogus profundities picked up here and there from the secular literary world, he is as likely as anyone else to talk arrant nonsense." Oddie's supercilious observation was wide of the mark; but it is true that Rolheiser can be too free on occasion with the germane quotation, preferring the literary equivalent of the sound bite over substantive exegesis, peppering his writing with names mighty and famous. The line between the apt allusion and the dilettantish indulgence is not always skillfully maintained.

Critics of Rolheiser's informality and of his receptivity to secular society, however, are vastly outnumbered by his legion of faithful readers—and the numerous editors who form a cordon around him. Michael Kelly, editor of the Dublin-based *Irish Catholic*, one of the newspapers that carries Rolheiser's weekly column, is dismayed by the criticism he receives for publishing a column some find dangerously unorthodox. But Kelly understands Rolheiser's broad appeal. "Ron scratches the felt need that people have to go beyond the ordinary and search for something deeper," he observes. "At the same time his engaging and conversational style means that his writing is not intimidating for the uninitiated." Rolheiser's writing, says Kelly, "is rooted in human experience and as such has an earthy, sometimes gritty, feel to it. His spiritual writing is read in convents, presbyteries, nursing homes, university campuses, and, yes, over kitchen tables."

Robert Beloin, the Catholic chaplain and director of the Thomas More Center at Yale University—and an old Louvain friend of Rolheiser's—finds much of the criticism of Rolheiser not only unfounded but curiously inattentive to his deep familiarity with, and ardent love for, the Catholic tradition. Rolheiser is well versed in that tradition, Beloin notes, and also "has a terrific grasp of contemporary theologians and genuinely values the contributions of the arts.... He is endlessly creative in re-formulating theological insights with fresh language. He wants to engage in dialogue with secular society in a way that is respectful and in a language that is not tired, as so much of our theological and spiritual language is."

Rolheiser's argument that secularism's advance is greatly augmented by the church's failure to embrace its challenges finds regular expression in his call for the revitalization of the romantic imagination. "What we are lacking," he writes, "is fire, romance, [and] aesthetics, as these pertain to our faith and ecclesial lives. What needs to be inflamed today inside religion is its romantic imagination, and that is not so much the job of the theologian as it is the job of the artist and the saint." In *Against an Infinite Horizon: The Finger of God in Our Everyday Lives* [7], he argues that the church cannot productively respond to modernity's dangers and attractions with either "a petrified imagination" (i.e., "only what worked before can work now") or "a fuzzy uncritical imagination" ("change is always a sign of progress"). Required instead is what he calls a "paschal imagination," one that will allow us to "look at the pattern of death and resurrection in Christ and

then...critically shape our destiny by naming our deaths, claiming our resurrections, letting the old ascend, and living with the spirit that God is actually giving us." Rolheiser is a priest, after all, and his devotion to prayer, liturgy, and efficacy of the sacraments goes without saying. But he also believes that the romantic imagination—the paschal imagination—is fed as much by fiction writers and poets as it is by traditional piety or the holy women and men whose sanctity and heroic witness continue to inspire. At the same time—and this is where his fearless catholic sensibility is most in evidence—it exists in credible dialogue with philosophical figures, often seen as inimical to Christianity, whose insights and suffering enrich the lives of people of faith. That is why Rolheiser has no problem quoting Nietzsche favorably.

His conviction that the romantic imagination is the route to Catholicism's resuscitation leads Rolheiser to draw frequently on novelists and poets for help in mapping the way forward. Those he reads avidly include both Catholic and non-Catholic writers, from Flannery O'Connor, Mary Gordon, and Annie Dillard to Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, and Margaret Atwood. Rolheiser's preference for female authors speaks to the broad appeal he enjoys among women readers. Prominent Catholic philanthropist and activist Kerry Robinson notes that "Ron has been deeply, positively influenced by women the whole course of his life," adding that "he is naturally at ease with women, relishes their company, [and] respects their intellect."

Part of the nurturing ground for Rolheiser's approach to people and for his healthy spirituality can be found in his Catholic prairie sensibility. Reared in a predominantly Protestant area of Canada, Rolheiser imbibed many of the Baptist-inspired Social Gospel values espoused by the likes of Tommy Douglas (a Baptist minister and founder of the Canadian health-care system), and later by many Catholics keen on implementing the social doctrine of the church. But he also tasted the isolation of a minority faith that relies on its own sense of community—a missionary, ethnic church, thousands of kilometers away from the centers of Catholic power in Canada.

This prairie sensibility was also informed by geography, weather, and distance, as social activist and spiritual writer Mary Jo Leddy astutely observes. A Saskatchewan native, like Rolheiser, she recalls life on the prairies in that era as "unremittingly harsh." Everything depended on the year's crops, which in turn depended on the caprices of weather. During the long, harsh winters, people huddled together for comfort and conversation—for survival, really. Leddy notes: "This is the 'landscape' of Ron's spirituality: a vast space in which you knew your place. We did not grow up with an image of ourselves as masters of the universe. We were part of something bigger that we didn't control, something vast, harsh but also very beautiful."

Isolation, struggle, and beauty—the primary ingredients of Rolheiser's spirituality—find expression in his belief that we are an Advent people, called to be patient, haunted by a horizon of welcome and terror, blinding grace and personal sundering. In the end—and long before—we all attend on God and we wait. Advent is a gestation process that cannot be rushed, Rolheiser likes to say. He quotes Tomáš Halik, the Czech

underground priest and thinker, who once commented that “an atheist is simply another term for someone who doesn’t have enough patience for God.”

Helping his readers develop such patience lies at the heart of the Rolheiser modus operandi. Although his tenure as president of the Oblate School of Theology has seen significant expansion of the school’s programs and physical plant, Rolheiser’s vocation and its priorities remain intact: writing, retreat-giving, and lecturing on the things that free the soul. And one of those things, Rolheiser has written, is the keen knowledge that irrespective of our flaws and stumblings, we are loved and sustained in existence by an encompassing Ardor: “To have the courage to let ourselves be embraced when we are sinful and bitter is to, first of all, know a God who—as Jesus, Julian of Norwich, Rembrandt, and Henri Nouwen assure us—is both a blessing Father and a caressing Mother, who sees with the eyes of the heart, and who, despite our weaknesses and angers, sits completely relaxed, smiling, with a face like a marvelous symphony.”

What some critics see as Rolheiser’s complacency, his supposedly uncritical embrace of modern secular society, is actually borne of his remarkable faith and confidence in God’s abiding presence and care. Like the philosopher Charles Taylor, a fellow Canadian and Catholic, Rolheiser is keenly aware that modern liberal values such as tolerance and benevolence, and especially respect for individual dignity and freedom, have deep Christian roots. As a consequence, Catholics can find “our voice from within the achievements of modernity,” not in mere opposition to it, Taylor has written. That is the voice you hear whenever you are lucky enough to be reading or listening to Fr. Ronald Rolheiser.