

Rolheiser: Our ache for earthly immortality

We share the world with more than seven and a half billion people and each of us has the irrepressible, innate sense that we are special and uniquely destined.

This isn't surprising since each one of us is indeed unique and special. But how does one feel special among seven and half billion others?

We try to stand out.

Generally we don't succeed, and so, as Allan Jones puts it, "We nurse within our hearts the hope that we are different, that we are special, that we are extraordinary. We long for the assurance that our birth was no accident, that a god had a hand in our coming to be, that we exist by divine fiat. We ache for a cure for the ultimate disease of mortality. Our madness comes when the pressure is too great and we fabricate a vital lie to cover up the fact that we are mediocre, accidental, mortal. We fail to see the glory of the Good News. The vital lie is unnecessary because all the things we truly long for have been freely given us."

All of us know what those words mean: We sense that we are extraordinary, precious, and significant, irrespective of our practical fortunes in life.

Deep down we have the feeling that we are uniquely loved and specially called to a life of meaning and significance. We know too, though more in faith than in feeling, that we are precious not on the basis of what we accomplish but rather on the basis of having been created and loved by God.

But this intuition, however deep in our souls, invariably wilts in the face of trying to live a life that's unique and special in a world in which billions of others are also trying to do the same thing. And so we can be overwhelmed by a sense of our own mediocrity, anonymity, and mortality and begin to fear that we're not precious but are merely another-among-many, nobody special, one of billions, living among billions.

When we feel like this, we are tempted to believe that we are precious and unique only when we accomplish something which precisely sets us apart and ensures that we will be remembered.

For most of us, the task of our lives then becomes that of guaranteeing our own preciousness, meaning, and immortality because, at the end of the day, we believe that this is contingent upon our own accomplishments, on creating our

own specialness.

And so we struggle to be content with ordinary lives of anonymity, hidden in God. Rather we try to stand out, to leave a mark, to accomplish something extraordinary, and so ensure that we will be recognized and remembered.

Few things impede our peace and happiness as does this effort. We set for ourselves the impossible, frustrating task of assuring for ourselves something which only God can give us, significance and immortality. Ordinary life then never seems enough for us, and we live restless, competitive, driven lives.

Why isn't ordinary life enough for us? Why do our lives always seem too small and not exciting enough? Why do we habitually feel dissatisfied at not being special?

Why our need to leave a mark? Why does our own situation often feel so suffocating? Why can't we more easily embrace each other as sisters and brothers and rejoice in each other's gifts and each other's existence? Why the perennial feeling that the other is a rival? Why the need for masks, for pretense, to project a certain image about ourselves?

The answer: We do all of these things to try to set ourselves apart because we are trying to give ourselves something that only God can give us, significance and immortality.

Scripture tells us that "faith alone saves." That simple line reveals the secret: Only God gives eternal life.

Preciousness, meaning, significance and immortality are free gifts from God and we would be a whole lot more restful, peaceful, humble, grateful, happy, and less competitive if we could believe that. A humble, ordinary life, shared with billions of others, would then contain enough to give us a sense of our preciousness, meaning, and significance.

Thomas Merton, on one of his less restless days wrote: "It is enough to be, in an ordinary human mode, with one's hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth, rising and going to bed. Putting on blankets and taking them off, making coffee and then drinking it. Defrosting the refrigerator, reading, meditating, working, praying. I live as my Fathers have lived on this earth, until eventually I die. Amen. There is no need to make an assertion of my life, especially so about it as mine, though doubtless it is not somebody else's. I must learn to live so as to gradually forget program and artifice."

Ordinary life is enough. There isn't any need to make an assertion with our lives. Our preciousness and meaning lie within the preciousness and meaning of life itself, not in having to accomplish something special.