

Rolheiser: Faith and levity

Shusaku Endo, the Japanese author of the classic novel, *Silence* (upon which Martin Scorsese based his movie) was a Catholic who didn't always find his native land, Japan, sympathetic to his faith. He was misunderstood but kept his balance and good heart by placing a high value on levity. It was his way of integrating his faith with his own experience of occasional personal failure and his way of keeping his perspective on a culture which misunderstood him. Levity, he believed, makes faith livable.

He's right. Levity is what makes faith livable because humor and irony give us the perspective we need to forgive ourselves and others for our weaknesses and mistakes. When we're too serious there's no forgiveness, least of all for ourselves.

What is humor? What's its meaning?

A generation ago, Peter Berger, wrote a book, *A Rumor of Angels*, in which he looked at the question of humor philosophically. I like his conclusion. In humor, he submits, we touch the transcendent. To be able to laugh at a situation, no matter how dire or tragic, shows that we're in some way above that situation, that there's something in us that's not imprisoned by that situation, or any situation.

There's a wonderful example of this in the writings of the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova. During the purges of Stalin, her husband had been arrested, as had many others. She occasionally tried to visit the prison he was in to leave letters and packages for him. Standing in long lines outside of that prison in St. Petersburg, she waited alongside other women whose husbands or sons had also been arrested.

The situation bordered on the absurd. None of them even knew whether their loved ones were even alive and the guards made them wait for hours without explanation, often in the cold of winter.

One day, as she was standing in line waiting, another woman recognized her, approached her, and asked: "Can you describe this?" Akhmatova replied: "I can," and when she said this something like a smile passed between them.

A smile passed between them. That smile contained some levity and that allowed them both to realize, however unconsciously, that they were transcendent to that situation. The smile that passed between them alerted them both to the fact that they were more than what they were in that moment. Awful as it was, they weren't ultimately prisoners to that moment.

Moreover, that smile was a prophetic and political act of defiance, based upon faith. Levity is subversive.

This is true too not just for how we live inside our faith lives; it's true too for how we live, healthily, inside our families. A family that's too serious will not allow for forgiveness. Its heaviness will eventually drive its members either into depression or away from the family. Moreover, it will make an idol out of itself.

Conversely, a family that can take itself seriously but still laugh at itself will be a family where there is forgiveness because levity will give them a healthy perspective on their foibles. A family that's healthy will sometimes look at itself honestly and with the kind of smile that passed between Anna Akhmatova and her friend, say of itself: "Aren't we pathetic!"

That's true too of nationalism. We need to take our nation seriously, even as a certain kind levity keeps this seriousness in perspective. I'm a Canadian. As Canadians, we love our country, are proud of it, and would, if push came to shove, die for it. But we have a wonderful levity about our patriotism. We make jokes about it and enjoy it when others make jokes about us. Consequently, we don't have any bitter controversies regarding who loves the country and who doesn't. Our lightness keeps us in unity.

All of this, of course, is doubly true of faith and spirituality. Real faith is deep, an indelible brand inside the soul, a DNA that dictates behavior. Moreover, real faith does not sidestep the tragic within our lives but equips us to face the heaviness in life where we meet disappointment, personal failure, heartbreak, injustice, betrayal, the breakdown of cherished relationships, the death of loved ones, sickness, the diminishment of our own health, and ultimately our own death.

This is not to be confused with any natural or contrived optimism that refuses to see the dark. Rather real faith, precisely because it is real and therefore keeps us inchoately aware of our identity and transcendence, will always allow us a discreet, knowing smile, no matter the situation. Like the English martyr Thomas More, we will be able to joke a bit with our executioner and we will also be able to forgive others and ourselves for not being perfect.

Our lives often are pathetic. But it's okay. We can still laugh with each other! We're in good hands. The God who made us obviously has a sense of humor – and therefore understanding and forgiveness.

Too many books on Christian spirituality might more aptly be entitled: The Unbearable Heaviness of Faith.