

Rolheiser: Late migrations

Jesus says that if we follow him, the cross, pain, will find us.

That message is chronically misunderstood.

Maybe we would understand it better if Jesus had worded it this way: *The more sensitive you become, the more pain will seep into your life.* We catch the connection then.

Sensitive persons suffer more deeply, just as they also drink in more deeply the joys and beauties of life. Pain enters them more deeply for the same reason that meaning does. They're open to it. The calloused (by definition) are spared of both, deep pain and deep joy.

With this as a backdrop I would like to introduce readers to a new book by Margaret Renkl, *Late Migrations – A Natural History of Love and Loss.*

This book manifests a rare sensitivity. Some people are gifted intellectually, others artistically, others romantically, and still others emotionally. Renkl is gifted with all of these; particularly with an emotional intelligence which she combines with the refined aesthetics of an artist and then further combines those two with the skill of a gifted, natural writer. It makes for a good package.

Content is only part of the gift of this book. Beyond its message, it's a great piece of writing and a nice piece of art as well.

It's also a book about faith, though Renkl does not express this very explicitly.

She writes primarily as a naturalist, an urban Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, someone who admires nature, spends a lot of time with it, understands well its prodigal character and its innate cruelties, and understands too how those cruelties (where, within nature, life can seem cheap and easily taken) are connected to the deepest forces undergirding all life, including our own.

She shares a certain complexity of character with the great paleontologist, mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who was fond of saying that he was born with two incurable loves, a natural love of the pagan world and all its beauties and an equally strong love for the mystical, the other world, that is, the God behind this world.

However, unlike Teilhard who is very explicit about his sense of God and the centrality of faith, Renkl's faith is more inchoate, though clearly manifest in her understanding of nature and in how she intuits the finger of God working inside the stories she shares.

The book is a compilation of short essays, alternating between wonderfully aesthetic descriptions of the life of the birds she feeds and the gardens she tends to equally sensitive descriptions of her own life and that of her family, particularly in terms of loss and grief as inextricably intertwined with love.

A few examples:

- On our shortcomings in life: “Human beings are creatures made for joy. Against all evidence, we tell ourselves that grief and loneliness and despair are tragedies, unwelcome variations from the pleasure and calm and safety that in the right way of the world would form the firm ground of our being.”
- On the lessons to be learned from observing nature: “Every day the world is teaching me what I need to know to be in the world.”
- On how sentimentality makes for a one-sided compassion: “The story of one drowned Syrian boy washed up in the surf keeps us awake at night with grief. The story of four million refugees streaming out of Syria seems more like a math problem.”
- On nature’s beauty and its cruelty: “Inside the nest box, the baby birds are safe from the hawks, sheltered from the wind, protected from the sharp eye of the crow and the terrible tongue of the red-bellied woodpecker. [But ...] Inside the nest box, the baby birds are powerless, vulnerable to the fury of the pitched summer sun, of the house sparrow’s beak. Bounded on all sides by their sheltering home, they are a meal the rat snake eats at its leisure.”
- On taking care of our aging loved ones until they die: “The end of caregiving is freedom. The end of caregiving is [also] grief.”
- On responding to a woman who insinuated that she, Renkl, was a coward because she much feared the loss of loved ones: “It occurred to me to wonder if she had ever, even once, loved anyone enough to fear the possibility of loss, but that thought was as ugly as her own, and in any case she was not wrong.”

Richard Rohr suggests that we are forever dealing with the twin truths of *great suffering* and *great love*.

During the course of this book, Renkl shares how her mother, a woman who could in certain areas of her life exhibit extraordinary energy and zest, would sometimes suffer through periods of paralyzing depression and how she herself is not immune to that same experience.

There’s a logic to that since, as Jesus says, sensitive persons drink in things very deeply, both suffering and love and the former can paralyze you in grief, even as the latter can give you extraordinary energy and zest.

This book deserves to be read.