

Rolheiser: Creating and holding space for our brokenness

Some years ago I went on a weekend retreat given by a woman who made no secret about the fact that not being able to have children constituted a deep wound in her life. So she offered retreats on the pain of being unable to have children. Being a celibate and not having my own children, I went on one of these retreats, the only man to venture there. The rest of the participants were women, mostly in their 40s and 50s, who had not borne children of their own.

Our leader, using scripture, biography, poetry, and psychology, examined the issue of barrenness from many points of view. The retreat came to a head on Saturday evening with a ritual in chapel in which various participants went up a huge cross and spoke out their pain for Jesus and everyone else to hear. That was followed by us watching, together, the British movie, *Secrets and Lies*, within which one woman's heartache at being unable to conceive a child is powerfully highlighted.

Afterwards there was a lot of honest sharing of feelings – and lots and lots of tears! But after that painful sharing of pain and the over-generous tears which accompanied it, the entire atmosphere changed, as if some dark storm had just done its thing but left us still intact. There was relief, and plenty of laughter and lightheartedness. A storm had indeed passed us over and we were safe.

All pain can be borne if it can be shared. Art Schopenhauer is credited with saying that, but, irrespective of who said it first, it captures what happened at that retreat. A deep pain was made easier to bear not because it was taken away but because it was shared, and shared in a “sacramental” way. Yes, there are sacraments that don't take place in a church, but still have sacramental power. And we need more of these.

For example, Rachel Held Evans writes: “Often I hear from readers who have left their churches because they had no songs for them to sing after the miscarriage, the shooting, the earthquake, the divorce, the diagnosis, the attack, the bankruptcy. The American tendency toward triumphalism, of optimism rooted in success, money, and privilege, will infect and sap of substance any faith community that has lost its capacity for *holding space for those in grief.*”

She's right. Our churches aren't creating enough space for holding grief.

In essence: In the everyday, practical spirituality of community, prayer, liturgy, and Eucharist within our churches we don't lean sufficiently on the fact that Christ is both a dying and a rising reality. We generally don't take the dying part of Christ as seriously as we should.

What are the consequences?

Among other things, it means that we don't create enough communal, ritual celebrations in our churches within which people can feel free to own and express their brokenness and grief communally and in a "sacramental" way.

Granted our churches do have funeral rites, sacraments of the sick, reconciliation services, special prayer services after a tragedy within a community, and other rituals and gatherings that are powerful spaces for holding grief and brokenness. However (with the exception of the sacrament of reconciliation which though is generally a private, one-to-one ritual) these are generally tied to a special, singular circumstance such as a death, a serious sickness, or an episodic tragedy within a community.

What we lack are regular ecclesially-based, communal rituals, analogous to an *Alcoholics Anonymous* meetings, around which people can come, share their brokenness, and experience a grace that can only come from community.

We need various kinds of "sacramental" celebrations in our churches within which, to use Rachel Held Evans' terminology, we can create and hold space for those who are grieving a broken heart, a miscarriage, an abortion, a dire medical diagnosis, a bankruptcy, the loss of a job, a divorce, a forced retirement, a rejection in love, the death of a cherished dream, the movement into assisted living, the adjustment to an empty nest within a marriage, barrenness, and frustrations of every kind.

What will these rituals look like? Mostly they don't exist yet so it is up to us to invent them.

Charles Taylor suggests that the religious struggle today is not so much a struggle of faith but a struggle of the imagination. Nobody has ever lived in this kind of world before.

We need some new rituals. We're pioneers in new territory, and pioneers have to improvise.

Admittedly, pain and brokenness have always been with us, but past generations had communal ways of creating space for holding grief. Families, communities, and churches then had less of a struggle with the kind individualism that today leaves us mostly alone to deal with our brokenness.

Today there's no longer a sufficient communal and ecclesial structure to help us accept that, here in this life, we live "mourning and weeping in a valley of tears."

We need to imagine some new, sacramental rituals within which to help hold our grief.