

Rotheiser: Deeper things under the surface

Imagine this. You are the dutiful daughter or son and your mother is widowed and living in an assisted living facility. You happen to be living close by while your sister is living across the country, thousands of miles away. So the weight falls on you to be the one to help take care of your mother. You dutifully visit her each day. Every afternoon, on route home from work, you stop and spend an hour with her as she has her early dinner. And you do this faithfully, five times a week, year after year.

As you spend this hour each day with your mother, year after year, how many times during the course of a year will you have a truly stimulating and deep conversation with your mother? Once? Twice? Never? What are you talking about each day? Trivial things: the weather, your favorite sports team, what your kids are doing, the latest show on television, her aches and pains, and the mundane details of your own life. Occasionally you might even doze off for a while as she eats her early dinner.

In a good year, perhaps once or twice, the conversation will take on some depth and the two of you will share more deeply about something of importance; but, save for that rare occasion, you will simply be filling in the time each day with superficial conversation.

But, and this is the question, are those daily visits with your mother in fact superficial, merely functionary because your conversations aren't deep? Are you simply going through the motions of intimate relationship because of duty? Is anything deep happening?

Well, compare this with your sister who is (conveniently) living across the country and comes home once a year to visit your mother. When she visits, both she and your mother are wonderfully animated, they embrace enthusiastically, shed some tears upon seeing each other, and seemingly talk about things beyond the weather, their favorite sports teams, and their own tiredness. And you could kill them both! It seems that in this once-a-year meeting they have something that you, who visit daily, do not have. But is this true? Is what is happening between your sister and your mother in fact deeper than what is occurring each day when you visit your mother?

Absolutely not. What they have is, no doubt, more emotional and more affective, but it is, at the end of day, not particularly deep. When your mother dies, you will know your mother better than anyone else knows her and you will be much closer to her than your sister. Why? Because through all those days when you visited her and seemed to talk about nothing beyond the weather, some deeper things were happening under the surface. When your sister visited your mother

things were happening on the surface (though emotionally and affectively the surface can look wonderfully more intriguing than what lies beneath it.) That is why honeymoons look better than marriage.

What your sister had with your mother is what novices experience in prayer and what couples experience on a honeymoon. What you had with your mother is what people experience in prayer and relationships when they are faithful over a long period of time.

At a certain level of intimacy in all our relationships, including our relationship with God in prayer, the emotions and the affectivity (wonderful as they are) will become less and less important and simple presence, just being together, will become paramount. Previous to that, the important things were happening on the surface and emotions and affectivity were important; now deep bonding is happening beneath the surface and emotions and affectivity recede in importance.

At a certain depth of relationship just being present to each other is what is important.

Too often, both popular psychology and popular spirituality do not really grasp this and consequently confuse the novice for the proficient, the honeymoon for the wedding, and the surface for the depth. In all of our relationships, we cannot make promises as to how we will always feel, but we can make promises to always be faithful, to show up, to be there, even if we are only talking about the weather, our favorite sports team, the latest television program, or our own tiredness. And it is okay occasionally to fall asleep while there because as Therese of Lisieux once said: a little child is equally pleasing to its parents, awake or asleep, probably more asleep!

That also holds true for prayer. God does not mind us occasionally napping while at prayer because we are there and that is enough.

The great Spanish doctor of the soul John of the Cross tells us that as we travel deeper into any relationship, be it with God in prayer, with each other in intimacy, or with the community at large in service, eventually the surface will be less emotive and less affective and *the deeper things will begin to happen under the surface.*