

Rolheiser: Faith and dying

We tend to nurse a certain naiveté about what faith means in the face of death.

The common notion among us as Christians is that if someone has a genuine faith she should be able to face death without fear or doubt. The implication then of course is that having fear and doubt when one is dying is an indication of a weak faith.

While it's true that many people with a strong faith do face death calmly and without fear, that's not always the case, nor necessarily the norm.

We can begin with Jesus. Surely he had real faith and yet, in the moments just before his death, he called out in both fear and doubt.

His cry of anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me", came from a genuine anguish that was not, as we sometimes piously postulate, uttered for divine effect, not really meant, but something for us to hear. Moments before he died, Jesus suffered real fear and real doubt.

Where was his faith? Well, that depends upon how we understand faith and the specific modality it can take on in our dying.

In her famous study of the stages of dying, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, suggests there are five stages we undergo in the dying process: *Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance*.

Our first response to receiving a terminal diagnosis is denial – *This is not happening!* Then when we have to accept that it is happening our reaction is anger – *Why me!* Eventually anger gives way to bargaining – *How much time can I still draw out of this?* This is followed by depression and finally, when nothing serves us any longer, there's acceptance – *I'm going to die*. This is all very true.

But in a deeply insightful book, *The Grace in Dying*, Kathleen Dowling Singh, basing her insights upon the experience of sitting at the bedside of many dying people, suggests there are additional stages: *Doubt, Resignation, and Ecstasy*. Those stages help shed light on how Jesus faced his death.

The night before he died, in Gethsemane, Jesus accepted his death, clearly. But that acceptance was not yet full resignation. That only took place the next day on the cross in a final surrender when, as the Gospels put it, *he bowed his head and gave over his spirit*.

And, just before that, he experienced an awful fear that what he had always believed in and taught about God was perhaps not so. Maybe the heavens were empty and maybe what we deem as God's promises amount only to wishful thinking.

But, as we know, he didn't give into that doubt, but rather, inside of its darkness, gave himself over in trust. Jesus died in faith – though not in what we often naively believe faith to be. To die in faith does not always mean that we die calmly, without fear and doubt.

For instance, the renowned biblical scholar, Raymond E. Brown, commenting on the fear of death inside the community of the Beloved disciple, writes: “The finality of death and the uncertainties it creates causes trembling among those who have spent their lives professing Christ. Indeed, among the small community of Johannine disciples, it was not unusual for people to confess that doubts had come into their minds as they encountered death. ...The Lazarus story is placed at the end of Jesus' public ministry in John to teach us that when confronted with the visible reality of the grave, all need to hear and embrace the bold message that Jesus proclaimed: 'I am the life.' ... For John, no matter how often we renew our faith, there is the supreme testing by death. Whether the death of a loved one or one's own death, it is the moment when one realizes that it all depends on God. During our lives we have been able to shield ourselves from having to face this in a raw way. Confronted by death, mortality, all defenses fall away.”

Sometimes people with a deep faith face death in calm and peace. But sometimes they don't, and the fear and doubt that threatens them then is not necessarily a sign of a weak or faltering faith. It can be the opposite, as we see in Jesus.

Inside a person of faith, fear and doubt in the face of death is what the mystics call 'the dark night of the spirit' ... and this is what's going on inside that experience: The raw fear and doubt we are experiencing at that time make it impossible for us to mistake our own selves and our own life-force for God.

When we have to accept to die in trust inside of what seems like absolute negation and can only cry out in anguish to an apparent emptiness then it is no longer possible to confuse God with our own feelings and ego. In that, we experience the ultimate purification of soul.

We can have a deep faith and still find ourselves with doubt and fear in the face of death. Just look at Jesus.