

# Rolheiser: Inadequacy, hurt, and reconciliation

Even with the best intentions, even with no malice inside us, even when we are faithful, we sometimes cannot not hurt each other. Our human situation is simply too complex at times for us not to wound each other.

Here's an example: Soren Kierkegaard, who spent his whole life trying to be scrupulously faithful to what God was calling him to, once hurt a woman very deeply. As a young man, he had fallen in love with a woman, Regine, who, in return, loved him deeply. But as their marriage date approached, Kierkegaard was beset with an internal crisis, one both psychological and moral, within which he discerned that their marriage would, long range, be the cause for deep unhappiness for both of them and he called off the engagement. That decision hurt Regine, deeply and permanently. She never forgave him and he, for his part, was haunted for the rest of his life by the fact that he had hurt her so badly.

Initially, he wrote her a number of letters trying to explain his decision and apologizing for hurting her, hoping for her understanding and forgiveness. Eventually, he gave up, even as he wrote page after page in his private journals second-guessing himself, castigating himself, and then, conversely, trying to justify himself again and again in his decision not to marry her.

Nearly ten years after that fateful decision, with Regine now married to someone else, he spent weeks trying to draft the right letter to her – asking for forgiveness, offering new explanations for his actions, and begging for another chance to talk with her. He struggled to find the right words, something that might bring about an understanding. He finally settled on this letter:

*Cruel I was, that is true. Why? Indeed, you do not know that.*

*Silent I have been, that is certain. Only God knows what I have suffered – may God grant that I do not, even now, speak too soon after all!*

*Marry I could not. Even if you were still free, I could not.*

*However, you have loved me, as I have you. I owe you much – and now you are married. All right, I offer you for the second time what I can and dare and ought to offer you: reconciliation.*

*I do this in writing in order not to surprise or overwhelm you. Perhaps my personality did once have too strong an effect; that must*

*not happen again. But for the sake of God in heaven, please give serious consideration to whether you dare become involved in this, and if so, whether you prefer to speak with me at once or would rather exchange some letters first.*

*If the answer is 'No' – would you then please remember for the sake of a better world that I took this step as well.*

*In any case, as in the beginning  
so until now, sincerely and completely*

*devotedly, your S.K.*

*(Clare Carlisle, The Heart of a Philosopher, Penguin Book, c2019, p. 215)*

Well, the answer was “no”. He had enclosed his letter in another letter which he sent to her husband, asking him to decide whether or not to give it to his wife. It was returned unopened, accompanied by an angry note, his offer of reconciliation was bitterly rejected.

What’s the moral here? Simply this: We hurt each other; sometimes through selfishness, sometimes through carelessness, sometimes through infidelity, sometimes through cruel intention, but sometimes too when there is no selfishness, no carelessness, no betrayal, no cruelty of intention – but only the cruelty of circumstance, inadequacy, and human limit. We sometimes hurt each other as deeply through being faithful as through being unfaithful, albeit in a different way. But irrespective of whether there’s moral fault, betrayal, or an intended cruelty, there’s still deep hurt, sometimes so deep that, this side of eternity, no healing will take place.

Would that it be otherwise. Would that Kierkegaard could have explained himself so fully that Regine would have understood and forgiven him, would that each of us could explain ourselves so fully that we would be always understood and forgiven, and would that all of our lives could end like a warm-hearted movie where, before the closing credits, everything is understood and reconciled.

But that’s not the way it always ends; indeed, that’s not even the way it ended for Jesus. He died being looked at as a criminal, as a religious blasphemer, as someone who had done wrong. His offer of reconciliation was also returned unopened, accompanied by a bitter note.

I once visited a man who was dying of cancer at age 56. Already bedridden and in hospice care, but with his mind still clear, he shared this: “I am dying with this consolation: If I have an enemy in this world, I don’t know who it is. I can’t think of a single person that I need to be reconciled with.”

Few of us are that lucky. Most of us are still looking at some envelopes that have been returned unopened.