

Rolheiser: Our congenital complexity

The renowned spiritual writer, Ruth Burrows, begins her autobiography with these words: "I was born into this world with a tortured sensitivity. For long I have puzzled over the causes of my psychological anguish."

Unfortunately, to our loss, too many spiritual biographies don't begin like this, that is, by recognizing right at the start the bewildering, pathological complexity inside our own nature. We're not simple in heart, mind, and soul, nor indeed even in body.

Each of us has enough complexity within us to write our own treatise on abnormal psychology.

And that complexity must not only be recognized, it needs to be respected and hallowed because it stems not for what's worst in us but from what's best in us. We're complex because what beguiles us inside and tempts us in every direction is not, first of all, the wiliness of the devil but rather the image and likeness of God.

Inside us there's a divine fire, a greatness, which gives us infinite depth, insatiable desires, and enough luminosity to bewilder every psychologist. The image and likeness of God inside us, as John of the Cross writes, renders our hearts, minds, and souls "caverns" too deep to ever be filled in or fully understood.

It's my belief that Christian spirituality, at least in its popular preaching and catechesis, has too often not taken this seriously enough. In short, the impression has too much been given that Christian discipleship shouldn't be complicated: Why all this resistance within you! What's wrong with you!

But, as we know from our own experience, our innate complexity is forever throwing up complications and resistances to becoming a saint, to "willing the one thing".

Moreover, because our complexity hasn't been recognized and honored spiritually we often feel guilty about it: Why am I so complicated? Why do I have all these questions? Why am I so often confused? Why is sex such a powerful impulse? Why do I have some many temptations?

The simple answer: Because we are born with a godly fire within. Thus the source of so many of our confusions, temptations, and resistances comes as much what best in us as from the wiles of the Satan and the world.

What should we do in in the face of our own bewildering complexity?

Some Counsels for the Long Haul:

- ***Honor and hallow your complexity:*** Accept that this is a God-given gift inside you and, at the end of the day, it's what is best inside you. It's what separates you from plants and animals. Their nature is simple, but having an immortal, infinite soul makes for lots of complications as you struggle to live out your life within the finitude that besets you.
- ***Never underestimate your complexity – even as you resist massaging it:*** Recognize and respect the “demons and angels” that roam freely inside your heart and mind. But don't massage your complexity either, by fancying yourself as the tormented artist or as the existentialist who's heroically out of step with life.
- ***Befriend your shadow:*** It's the luminosity you've split off. Slowly, with proper caution and support, begin to face the inner things that frighten you.
- ***Hallow the power and place of sexuality within you:*** You're incurably sexual, and for a godly reason. Never deny or denigrate the power of sexuality – even as you carry it with a proper chastity.
- ***Name your wounds, grieve them, mourn your inconsummation.*** Whatever wounds that you don't grieve will eventually snakebite you. Accept and mourn the fact that here, in this life, there is no finished symphony.
- ***Never let the “transcendental impulse” inside you become drugged or imprisoned.*** Your complexity continually lets you know that you're built for more than this life. Never deaden this impulse inside you. Learn to recognize, through your frustrations and fantasies, the ways you often imprison it.
- ***Try to find a “higher love” by which to transcend the more immediate power of your natural instincts.*** All miracles begin with falling in love. Hallow your spontaneous impulses and temptations by searching for that higher love and higher value towards which they're pointing. Offering others your altruism and the gaze of admiration will feel so good and right that it will bring to fulfillment what you're really yearning for.
- ***Let your own complexity teach you understanding and empathy.*** By being in touch with your own complexity you will eventually learn that nothing is foreign to you and that what you see on the newscasts each day mirrors what's inside you.
- ***Forgive yourself often.*** Your complexity will trip you up many times and so you will need to forgive yourself many times. Live, knowing that God's mercy is a well that's never exhausted.
- ***Live under God's patience and understanding.*** God is your builder, the architect who constructed you and who is responsible for your complexity. Trust that God understands. Trust that God is more anxious about you than

you're anxious about yourself. The God who knows all things also knows and appreciates why you struggle.