

Rotheiser: Our unconscious search for God

How do we search for God?

It is easy to misunderstand what that means. We are forever searching for God, though mostly without knowing it. Usually, we think of our search for God as a conscious religious search, as something we do out of a spiritual side of ourselves. We tend to think of things this way: I have my normal life and its pursuits and, if I am so inclined, on the side, I might have a spiritual or religious pursuit wherein I try through prayer, reflection, and religious practices to get to know God. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. Our normal search for meaning, fulfillment, and even for pleasure, is in fact our search for God.

What do we naturally search for in life? By nature, we search for meaning, love, a soulmate, friendship, emotional connection, sexual fulfillment, significance, recognition, knowledge, creativity, play, humor, and pleasure. However, we tend not to see these pursuits as searching for God. In pursuing these things, we rarely, if ever, see them in any conscious way as our way of searching for God. In our minds, we are simply looking for happiness, meaning, fulfillment, and pleasure, and our search for God is something we need to do in another way, more consciously through some explicit religious practices.

Well, we are not the first persons to think like that. It has always been this way. For instance, St. Augustine struggled with exactly this, until one day he realized something. A searcher by temperament, Augustine spent the first thirty-four years of his life pursuing the things of this world: learning, meaning, love, sex, and a prestigious career. However, even before his conversion, there was a desire in him for God and the spiritual. However, like us, he saw that as a separate desire from what he was yearning for in the world. Only after his conversion did he realize something. Here is how he famously expressed it:

"Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. ... You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness."

This is an honest admission that he lived a good number of years not loving God; but it is also an admission that, during those years, he had massively misunderstood something and that misunderstanding lay at the root of his failure. What was that misunderstanding?

Reading his confession we tend to focus on the first part of it, namely, on his

realization that God was inside of him all the while, but that he was not inside of himself. This is a perennial struggle for us too. Less obvious in this confession and something that is also a perennial struggle for us, is his recognition that for all those years while he was searching for life in the world, a search he generally understood as having nothing to do with God, he was actually searching for God. What he was looking for in all those worldly things and pleasures was in fact the person of God. Indeed, his confession might be recast this way:

Late, late, have I loved you because I was outside of myself while all the while you were inside me, but I wasn't home, and I had no idea it was you I was actually looking for in the world. I never connected that search to you. In my mind, I was not looking for you; I was looking for what would bring me meaning, love, significance, sexual fulfillment, knowledge, pleasure, and a prestigious career. Never did I connect my longing for these things with my longing for you. I had no idea that everything I was chasing, all those things I was lonely for, were already inside me, in you. Late, late, have I understood that. Late, late, have I learned that what I am so deeply hungry and lonely for is contained inside of you. All these years, I never connected my restlessness, my seemingly selfish and lustful pursuit of things, with you. Everything I am lonely for is inside of you and you are inside of me. Late, late, have I realized this.

We are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods. So say the Greek Stoics. They are right.

Our whole life is simply a search to respond to that divine madness inside us, a madness Christians identify with infinite yearnings of the soul. Given those yearnings, like Augustine, we plunge into the world searching for meaning, love, a soulmate, friendship, emotional connection, sexual fulfillment, significance, recognition, knowledge, creativity, and pleasure, and that earthy pursuit, perhaps more than our explicit religious pursuits, is in fact our search for God.

Best to realize this early, so we do not have to write: "*Late, late, have I loved you!*"