

Rolheiser: Sacred permission to feel human

It is normal to feel restless as a child, lonely as a teenager, and frustrated by lack of intimacy as an adult; after all we live with insatiable desires of every kind, none of which will ever find full fulfillment this side of eternity.

Where do these desires come from? Why are they so insatiable? What is their meaning?

As a young boy, the Catholic catechisms I was instructed from and sermons I heard from the pulpit in fact answered those questions, but in a vocabulary far too abstract, theological, and churchy to do much for me existentially. They left me sensing there was an answer, but not one that was of help to me. So I quietly suffered the loneliness and the restlessness.

Moreover, I agonized because I felt that it was unholy to feel the way I did. My religious instruction, rich as it was, did not offer any benevolent smile from God on my restlessness and dissatisfaction. Puberty and the conscious stirring of sexuality made things worse. Now not only was I restless and dissatisfied, but the raw feelings and fantasies that were besetting me were considered positively sinful.

That was my state of mind when I entered religious life and the seminary immediately after high school. Of course, the restlessness continued, but my philosophical and theological studies gave me an understanding of what was so relentlessly stirring inside me and gave me sacred permission to be okay with that.

It started in my novitiate year with a talk one day from a visiting priest. We were novices, most of us in our late teens, and despite our commitment to religious life we were understandably restless, lonely, and fraught with sexual tension. Our visitor began his conference with a question: "Are you guys a little restless? Feeling a bit cooped up here?" We nodded. He went on: "Well you should be! You must be jumping out of your skins! All that young energy, boiling inside you! You must be going crazy! But it's okay, that's what you should be feeling if you're healthy! It's normal, it's good. You're young; this gets better!"

Hearing this, freed up something inside me. For the first time, in a language that genuinely spoke to me, someone had given me sacred permission to be at home inside my own skin.

My studies in literature, theology, and spirituality, continued to give me that permission, even as they helped me form a vision as to why these feelings were

inside me, how they took their origins and meaning in God, and how they were far from impure and unholy.

Looking back on my studies, a number of salient persons stand out in helping me understand the wildness, insatiability, meaning, and ultimate goodness of human desire.

The first was St. Augustine. The now famous quote with which he begins his *Confessions*: *You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*, has forever served me as the key to tie everything else together.

With that as my secret for synthesis, I met this axiom in Thomas Aquinas: *The adequate object of the intellect and will is all being as such*. That might sound abstract but even as a twenty-year-old, I grasped its meaning: In brief, what would you need to experience to finally say 'enough', I am satisfied? Aquinas' answer: *Everything!*

Later in my studies I read Karl Rahner. Like Aquinas, he too can seem hopelessly abstract when, for instance, he defines the human person as *Obediential potency living inside a supernatural existential*. Really? Well, essentially what he means by that can be translated into a single counsel he once offered a friend: *In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable we ultimately learn that here, in this life, there is no finished symphony*.

Finally, in my studies, I met the person and thought of Henri Nouwen. He continued to teach me what it means to live without ever getting to enjoy the finished symphony, and he articulated this with a unique genius and in a fresh vocabulary. Reading Nouwen is like being introduced to yourself, while still standing inside all your shadows. He also helps give you the sense that it is normal, healthy, and not impure or unholy to feel all those wild stirrings with their concomitant temptations inside yourself.

Each of us is a bundle of much untamed eros, of wild desire, longing, restlessness, loneliness, dissatisfaction, sexuality, and insatiability. We need to be given sacred permission to know this is normal and good because it is what we all feel, unless we are in a clinical depression or have for so long repressed these feelings that now they are expressed only negatively in destructive ways.

We all need to have someone to come visit us inside our particular "novitiate", ask us if we are painfully restless, and when we nod our heads, say: "Good! You're supposed to feel like that way! It means you're healthy! Know too that God is smiling on this!"