

# Rolheiser: Secrets revealed only in the fever

John Updike, after recovering from a serious illness, wrote a poem he called, *Fever*. It ends this way: *But it is a truth long known that some secrets are hidden from health.*

Deep down we already know this, but as a personal truth this is not something we appropriate in a classroom, from parents or mentors, or even from religious teaching. These just tell us that this is true, but knowing it does not itself impart wisdom. Wisdom is acquired, as Updike says, through a personal experience of serious illness, serious loss, or serious humiliation.

The late James Hillman, writing as an agnostic, came to the same conclusion. I remember hearing him at a large conference where, at point in his talk, he challenged his audience with words to this effect: Think back, honestly and with courage, and ask yourself: What are the experiences in your life that have made you deep, that have given you character?

In almost every case, you will have to admit that it was some humiliation or abuse you had to endure, some experience of powerlessness, helplessness, frustration, illness, or exclusion. It is not the things that brought glory or adulation into your life that gave you depth and character, the time you were the valedictorian for your class or the time you were the star athlete. These did not bring you depth. Rather the experience of powerlessness, inferiority, is what made you wise.

I recall too as a graduate student sitting in on a series of lectures by the renowned Polish psychiatrist, Kasmir Dabrowski who had written a number of books around a concept he termed "positive disintegration".

His essential thesis was that it is only by falling apart that we ever grow to higher levels of maturity and wisdom. Once, during a lecture, he was asked: "Why do we grow through the disintegrating experiences such as falling ill, falling apart, or being humiliated? Would it not be more logical to grow through the positive experiences of being loved, being affirmed, being successful, being healthy, and being admired? Shouldn't that fire gratitude inside us and, acting out of that gratitude, we should become more generous and wise?"

He gave this response: Ideally, maturity and wisdom should grow out of experiences of strength and success; and maybe in some instances they do. However, as a psychiatrist, all I can say is that in 40 years of clinical practice I have never seen it. I have only seen people transformed to higher levels of maturity through the experience of breaking down.

Jesus, it would seem, agrees. Take, for example, the incident in the Gospels where James and John come and ask whether they might be given the seats at his right hand and left hand when he comes into his glory.

It is significant that he takes their question seriously. He does not (in this instance) chide them for seeking their own glory; what he does instead is redefine glory and the route to it. He asks them: "Can you drink the cup?" They, naïve as to what is being asked of them, responded: "Yes, we can!" Jesus then tells them something to which they are even more naïve. He assures them that they will drink the cup, since eventually everyone will, but tells them that they still might not receive the glory because being seated in glory is still contingent upon something else.

What? What is "the cup"? How is drinking it the route to glory? And why might we not receive the glory even if we do drink the cup?

The cup, as is revealed later, is the cup of suffering and humiliation, the one Jesus has to drink during his passion and dying, the cup he asks his Father to spare him from when in Gethsemane he prays in agony: "Let this cup pass from me!"

In essence, what Jesus is telling James and John is this: *There is no route to Easter Sunday except through Good Friday.* There is no route to depth and wisdom except through suffering and humiliation. The connection is intrinsic, like the pain and groans of a woman are necessary to her when giving birth to a child.

Further still, Jesus is also saying that deep suffering will not automatically bring wisdom. Why not? Because, while there is an intrinsic connection between deep suffering and greater depth in our lives, the catch is that bitter suffering can make us deep in bitterness, anger, envy, and hatred just as easily as it can make us deep in compassion, forgiveness, empathy, and wisdom. We can have the pain, and not get the wisdom.

Fever! The primary symptom of being infected with the COVID-19 coronavirus is a high fever. Fever has now beset our world. The hope is that, after it so dangerously raises both our bodily and psychic temperatures, it will also reveal to us some of the secrets that are hidden from health. What are they? We don't know yet. They will only be revealed inside the fever.