

Rolheiser: Structure, ritual and habit as anchoring love, prayer and service

In his book, *The Second Mountain* David Brooks suggests that a key to sustaining fidelity in any vocation is to *build a structure of behavior for those moments when love falters*. He's right.

Anybody who has made a commitment to be faithful for the long haul inside a marriage, a friendship, a faith community, or a vocation to serve others, will need more than initial enthusiasm, bare-footed sincerity, affective energy, and good resolutions to sustain himself or herself on that road. It's one thing to have a honeymoon with someone, it's another to be in a marriage over many years. It's one thing to be an enthusiastic neophyte on a spiritual journey, it's another thing to remain faithful inside that journey for seventy or eighty years. And it's one thing to go out for a season and serve meals to the homeless, it's something else to be Dorothy Day.

So the question is: how do we sustain our initial enthusiasm, sincerity, affective energy, and good resolutions through the boredom, heartbreak, misunderstanding, tiredness, and temptations all of us will undergo in our lives, whether that be in our marriage, our vocation, our church life, our prayer life, or our service to others?

That question was put to me recently, speaking to a group of young seminarians, I shared that I had just celebrated forty-eight years of ministry. The seminarians peppered me with questions: What's the secret? How do you get through the rough times? How do you sustain good intention, good will, and good energy year after year? How do you sustain your prayer life over forty or fifty years?

I answered with an insight from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, whenever he officiated at a wedding, would tell the couple: *Today you are very much in love and think your love will sustain your marriage. It can't. But your marriage can sustain your love*. I advised the seminarians in the same way: don't trust your present enthusiasm and good energy to sustain your priesthood; let your priesthood sustain your enthusiasm and energy. What's at stake here?

A genuine commitment in faith, love, or service becomes a ritual container, an ark, like Noah's, that existentially locks you in. And the fact that you're locked in is exactly what makes the commitment work. You enter naively, believing that your good feelings and affective energies will sustain you. They won't. Inevitably they will be worn down by time, familiarity, boredom, misunderstanding, tiredness, wound, and new obsessions that emotionally tempt you elsewhere. So how can you sustain yourself in a commitment through periods of dryness? David Brook's answer is a good one – *by building a structure of*

behavior for exactly those moments.

How do you do that? Through routine, ritual, and habit. Anchor your person and your commitment in ritual habits that steady and hold you beyond your feelings on any given day. Set rituals for yourself, certain ritual behaviors, which you will do regularly no matter how you feel.

For me, as a priest, some of these are pre-set. As a priest, you are to daily pray the Office of the Church as a prayer for the world, no matter how you feel. You are to celebrate the Eucharist for others regularly, irrespective of whether or not this is personally meaningful to you on any given day. You are to do some private prayer daily, particularly when you don't feel like it. The list goes on.

These rituals give you structure and healthy routines, and they are needed because in the priesthood as in every other vocation, there are times of fervor when feelings are enough to sustain you; however there are also desert times, bitter times, angry times, times when love falters. It's then that a structure of behavior can steady and sustain you.

The same holds true for marriage. Couples have to build a structure of behavior for those times when love falters. To name one such ritual: a wife and husband need to have some ritual expression of affection when they wish each other a good day as they part each morning, no matter their emotions and feelings on a given day. That ritual is a container, an ark, which locks them in and holds them together until a better season and better feelings return. Ritual can sustain love when it falters.

In understanding this, we need beware of "Job's friends", that is, beware of the various books and gurus on spirituality, prayer, and marriage that give you the impression there's something wrong with you if your enthusiasm and emotional affectivity are not the glue that daily sustains you in your commitment.

Simply put, these are books written by spiritual novices and marriage manuals written by someone confusing a honeymoon for a marriage. Enthusiasm and good feelings are wonderful, but they can't sustain you through a marathon. For a marathon you need to have long-practiced strategies to carry you through the long tiring miles in the middle and at the end.