

# Rolheiser: The grace within passivity

A friend of mine shares this story. She grew up with five siblings and an alcoholic father. The effect of her father's alcoholism was devastating on her family.

Here's how she tells the story:

By the time my father died his alcoholism had destroyed our family. None of us kids could talk to each other anymore. We'd drifted apart to different parts of the country and had nothing to do with each other. My mother was a saint and kept trying through the years to have us reconcile with each other, inviting us to gather for Thanksgiving and Christmas and the like, but it never worked. All her efforts were for nothing. We hated each other. Then as my mother lay dying of cancer, in hospice, bedridden, and eventually in a coma, we, her kids, gathered by her bedside, watching her die, and she, helpless and unable to speak, was able to accomplish what she couldn't achieve through all those years when she could speak. Watching her die, we reconciled.

We all know similar stories of someone in their dying, when they were too helpless to speak or act, powerfully impacting, more powerfully than they ever did in word or action, those around them, pouring out a grace that blessed their loved ones.

Sometimes, of course, this isn't a question of reconciling a family but of powerfully strengthening their existing unity. Such was the case in a family history shared by Carla Marie Carlson, in her book, *Everyday Grace*.

Her family was already closely-knit, but Carlson shares how her mother's dying strengthened those family bonds and graced all the others who witnessed her dying: "Those who took the opportunity to be with my Mom during that journey have told me that their lives were forever changed. It was a remarkable time which I will always treasure. Lessons of acceptance and courage were abundant as she struggled with the realities of a dying body. It was dramatic and intense, but yet filled with peace and gratitude." Most anyone who has ever sat in vigil around a loved one who was dying can share a similar story.

There's a lesson here and a mystery.

The lesson is that we don't just do important things for each other and impact each other's lives by what we actively do for each other; we also do life-changing things for each other in what we passively absorb in helplessness. This is the mystery of passivity which we see, paradigmatically, played out in

what Jesus did for us.

As Christians, we say that Jesus *gave his life for us* and that he *gave his death for us*, but we tend to think of this as one and the same thing. It's not.

Jesus gave his life for us *through his activity*; he gave his death for us *through his passivity*. These were two separate movements.

Like the woman described earlier who tried for years to have her children reconcile with each through her activity, through her words and actions, and then eventually accomplished that through the helplessness and passivity of her deathbed, so too with Jesus. For three years he tried in every way to make us understand love, reconciliation, and faith, without full effect. Then, in less than 24 hours, in his helplessness, when he couldn't speak, in his dying, we got the lesson.

Both Jesus and his mother were able, in their helplessness and passivity, to give the world something that they were unable to give as effectively in their power and activity.

Unfortunately, this is not something our present culture, with its emphasis on health, productivity, achievement, and power very much understands. We no longer much understand or value the powerful grace that is given off by someone dying of a terminal illness; nor the powerful grace present in a person with a disability, or indeed the grace that's present in our own physical and personal disabilities. Nor do we much understand what we are giving to our families, friends, and colleagues when we, in powerlessness, have to absorb neglect, slights, and misunderstanding.

When a culture begins to talk about euthanasia it is an infallible indication that we no longer understand the grace within passivity.

In his writings, Henri Nouwen makes a distinction between what he terms our "achievements" and our "fruitfulness".

*Achievements* stem more directly from our activities: What have we positively accomplished? What have we actively done for others? And our achievements stop when we are no longer active.

*Fruitfulness*, on the other hand, goes far beyond what we have actively accomplished and is sourced as much by what we have passively absorbed as by what we actively produced.

The family described above reconciled not because of their mother's achievements, but because of her fruitfulness. Such is the mystery of passivity.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in his spiritual classic, *The Divine Milieu*, tells us that we are meant to help the world through both our activities and our

passivities, through both what we actively give and through what we passively absorb.