

Rolheiser: Run with the crowd and you stumble over your own ethics

In the Gospels the word “crowd” is nearly always used pejoratively, so much so that nearly every time the word is used you could preface it with the adjective “mindless.”

Crowds don't have a mind. They are fired and driven by whatever energy, hype, fad, ideology or hysteria is current. In the Gospels this energy is called “amazement.” We see numerous instances in the Gospels where Jesus says or does something that surprises the crowd and almost invariably this is followed by the phrase, “and the crowd was amazed.” Rarely is this a good thing.

Why? What's wrong or dangerous about crowd-energy?

Crowd-energy is dangerous because, most times, it is non-reflective. It simply conducts and transmits energy rather than discerning and transforming it. An apt image for crowd-energy, amazement in the biblical sense, is an electrical cord. An electrical cord simply lets energy flow through it. It's indifferent as to whether that energy is good or destructive. It's a pure conduit. Whatever flows into it is exactly what flows out.

Crowds tend to work in the same way. They let energy flow through them indiscriminately without discerning whether that energy is good or bad. For example, we speak of being caught-up in certain energy.

POSITIVE CROWDS

Sometimes this can be good, when crowds are caught-up in an energy that is positive, that helps build community. During the past weeks, for instance, many people in the world were caught up in the rescue of the trapped miners in Chile and that shared energy helped create community across national, ethnic, religious and political lines. We see crowd-energy too as mostly a positive thing around certain sporting events like the World Cup of Soccer or the World Series of Baseball.

But mostly the energy of a crowd is negative, the energy of ideology, fundamentalism, racism, fad and hype. Crowd-energy is the energy behind a gang rape. It was also the energy behind the crucifixion of Jesus.

It is instructive to look at the crowd before and during the crucifixion. Five days before he was crucified, Jesus entered into Jerusalem and the crowd enthusiastically shouted praise, wanting to make him their king.

Five days later, with virtually nothing changed, the same crowd was shouting: “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Crowds are fickle because crowds don't think. They

simply conduct whatever energy is gripping them.

In the incident in the Gospels where a woman is caught in adultery and is brought before Jesus by an over-zealous crowd, we see a perfect example of the dangerous, non-reflective energy of a crowd in contrast to the more reflective energy of an individual.

The text tells us that a crowd brought a woman to Jesus and demanded that he morally share their intent to stone her to death. But Jesus, in a now-famous challenge, tells them: "Let the person among you who is without sin cast the first stone."

The response: "They walked away, one by one, beginning with the eldest." A mindless crowd, caught up in the grip of a moral fever, brings a woman to Jesus. But they walk away as individuals, one by one, no longer inside the grip of that amazement.

Amazement, however, must be sharply distinguished from wonder and awe. Wonder and awe are the antithesis of amazement. In amazement, energy flows through you. In wonder and awe, energy stuns, paralyzes and holds you.

CARLIN QUIP

A clever quip from comedian George Carlin captures the difference. Explaining why he was congenitally skeptical of most "born-again" persons, Carlin quipped: "I distrust born-again people because they talk too much. When I was born I was so stunned I couldn't talk for two years! When someone has a religious experience that is powerful enough to mute them for a couple of years, I will take them seriously!"

In that lies the challenge: Beware of the energy that emanates from a crowd. Beware of the latest fad. Beware of hype of all kinds. Beware of the cheerleaders of both the liberals and the conservatives. Beware of any crowd who wants to stone someone to death in God's name.

Think back to the various crucifixions that you have been involved in and recall how, later, in the sobriety and clarity of some different air, you asked yourself: How could I have been so wrong? So cruel? So stupid?

Read accounts in the newspapers and on the Internet of young people with decent, good hearts who, caught up in the energy of crowd, cyber-bully someone to the point where he or she commits suicide. Think how, in each case, the various persons responsible eventually walk away, one by one, a lot more sober and reflective than they were when they were caught up on the mindless energy of a crowd.

Then display some old photos of yourself showing your various hairstyles and clothing styles throughout the years, and you'll have all the reminders you need about how fickle and mindless can be the energy of the moment.