

Rolheiser: Our struggle for proper celebration

We don't know how to celebrate things as they're meant to be celebrated. We want to, but mostly we don't know how. Generally we celebrate badly.

How do we normally celebrate? By overdoing things; by taking a lot of the things we ordinarily do, drinking, eating, talking, singing, and humoring, and bringing them to excess. For most of us, celebration means eating too much, drinking too much, singing too loudly, telling one joke too many, and hoping that somewhere in all that excess we will find the secret to make this occasion extraordinary.

We have this odd idea that we can find special joy and delight by pushing things beyond their normal limits. But there's precious little real delight in this.

Heightened enjoyment is found in connecting with others more deeply, in feeling our lives expanded, and in experiencing love and playfulness in a special way. But that doesn't happen in a frenzy. Hence our celebrations are mostly followed by a hangover, physical and emotional.

Why? Why is genuine celebration so hard to do?

Perhaps the main reason is that we struggle congenitally to simply enjoy things, to simply take life, pleasure, love, and enjoyment as gracious and free gifts from God, pure and simple.

It's not that we lack this capacity for this. God has given us this gift. More at issue is the fact that our capacity to enjoy is often mixed with inchoate feelings of guilt about experiencing pleasure (and the greater the pleasure, the deeper our feeling of guilt.)

Among other things, because of this, we often struggle to enjoy what's legitimately given us by God because, consciously or unconsciously, we feel that our experience of pleasure is somehow "stealing from God."

This is an uneasiness that particularly afflicts sensitive and moral souls. Somehow, in the name of God, we struggle to give ourselves full permission to enjoy, and this leaves us prone to excess (which is invariably a substitute for genuine enjoyment).

Whatever the reasons, we struggle with this and thus many of us go through life deprived of a healthy capacity to enjoy and, since nature will still have its way, we end up alternating between rebellious enjoyment ("pleasure we steal from God", but feel guilty about) and dutiful discipline (which we do without a

lot of delight). But we're rarely able to genuinely celebrate. We rarely find the genuine delight we are looking for in life and this pushes us into pseudo-celebration, namely, excess.

Put simply, because we struggle to give ourselves permission to enjoy, ironically we tend to pursue enjoyment too much and often not in the right ways. We confuse pleasure with delight, excess with ecstasy, and the obliteration of consciousness with heightened awareness. Because we cannot simply enjoy, we go to excess, burst our normal limits, and hope that obliterating our awareness will heighten it.

And yet, celebrate we must. We have an innate need to celebrate because certain moments and events of our lives (e.g., a birthday, a wedding, a graduation, a commitment, an achievement, or even a funeral) simply demand it. They demand to be surrounded with rituals which heighten and intensify their meaning and they demand that they be shared in a special, highlighted way with others. What we cease to celebrate we will soon cease to cherish.

The same is true of some of our deeper loving, playful, and creative moments. They too demand to be celebrated: highlighted, widened, and shared with others. We have an irrepressible need to celebrate, that's good. Indeed the need for ecstasy is hardwired into our very DNA. But ecstasy is heightened awareness, not obliterated consciousness. Celebration is meant to intensify our awareness, not deaden it.

The object of celebration is to highlight certain events and feelings so as to share them with others in an extraordinary way. But, given our misunderstandings about celebration, we mostly make pseudo-celebration, that is, we overdo things to a point where we take our own awareness and our awareness of the occasion out of the equation.

We have a lot to overcome in our struggle to come to genuine celebration. We still need to learn that heightened enjoyment is not found in excess, deeper community is not found in mindless intimacy, and heightened awareness is not found in a frenzied deadening of our consciousness. Until we learn that lesson we will still mostly trudge home hung-over, more empty, more tired, and more alone than before the party. A hangover is a sure sign that, somewhere back down the road, we missed a sign post. We struggle to know how to celebrate, but we must continue to try.

Jesus came and declared a wedding feast, a celebration, at the centre of life. They crucified him not for being too ascetical, but because he told us we should actually enjoy our lives, assuring us that God and life will give us more goodness and enjoyment than we can stand, if we can learn to receive them with the proper reverence and without undue fear.