

Rolheiser: Unfinished relationships

A colleague of mine, a clinical therapist, shares this story: A woman came to him in considerable distress. Her husband had recently died of a heart attack. His death had been sudden and at a most inept time. They'd been happily married for thirty years and, during all those years, had never had a major crisis in their relationship. On the day her husband died, they had gotten into an argument about something very insignificant and it had escalated to where they began to hurl some mean and cutting words at each other. At a point, agitated and angry, her husband stomped out of the room, told her he was going shopping, then died of a heart attack before he got to the car. Understandably, the woman was devastated, by the sudden death of her spouse but also by that last exchange. "All these years," she lamented, "we had this loving relationship and then we have this useless argument over nothing and it ends up being our last conversation!"

The therapist led off with something meant partially in humor. He said: "How horrible of him to do that to you! To die just then!" Obviously the man hadn't intended his death, but its timing was in fact awfully unfair to his wife, as it left her holding a guilt that was seemingly permanent with no apparent avenue for resolution.

However, after that opening, the therapist followed by asking her: "If you had your husband back for five minutes what would you say to him?" Without hesitation, she answered: "I'd tell him how much I loved him, how good he was to me for all these years, and how our little moment of anger at the end was a meaningless epi-second that means nothing in terms our love."

The therapist then said: "You're a woman of faith, you believe in the communion of saints; well, your husband is alive still and present to you now, so why don't you just say all those things to him right now. It's not too late to express that all to him!"

He's right. It's never too late! It's never too late to tell our deceased loved ones how we really feel about them. It's never too late to apologize for the ways we might have hurt them. It's never too late to ask their forgiveness for our negligence in the relationship, and it's never too late to speak the words of appreciation, affirmation, and gratitude that we should have spoken to them while they were alive. As Christians, we have the great consolation of knowing that death isn't final, that it's never too late.

And we desperately need that particular consolation ... and that second chance. No matter who we are, we're always inadequate in our relationships. We can't always be present to our loved ones as we should, we sometimes say things in anger and bitterness that leave deep scars, we betray trust in all kinds of ways, and we mostly lack the maturity and self-confidence to express the

affirmation we should be conveying to our loved ones. None of us ever fully measures up. When Karl Rahner says that none of us ever experience the "full symphony" in this life, he isn't just referring to the fact that none of us ever fully realizes her dream, he's also referring to the fact that in all of our most important relationships none of us ever fully measures up.

At the end of the day, all of us lose loved ones in ways similar to how that woman lost her husband, with unfinished business, with bad timing. There are always things that should have been said and weren't and there are always things that shouldn't have been said and were.

But that's where our Christian faith comes in. We aren't the only ones who come up short. At the moment of Jesus' death, virtually all of his disciples had deserted. The timing here was also very bad. Good Friday was bad long before it was good. But, and this is the point, as Christians, we don't believe there will always be happy endings in this life, nor that we will always be adequate in life. Rather we believe that the fullness of life and happiness will come to us through the redemption of what has gone wrong, not least with what has gone wrong because of our own inadequacies and weakness.

G.K. Chesterton said that Christianity is special because in its belief in the communion of saints, "even the dead get a vote". They get more than a vote. They still get to hear what we're saying to them.

So ... if you've lost a loved one in a situation where there was still something unresolved, where there was still a tension that needed easing, where you should have been more attentive, or where you feel badly because you never adequately expressed the affirmation and affection that you might have, know it's not too late. It can all still be done!