

FR RONALD ROLHEISER - A SPIRITUALITY OF NON-HURRYING

“Nothing can be more useful to a man than a determination not to be hurried.” Thoreau wrote that and it’s not meant as something trivial.

We hurry too much, pure and simple. As Henri Nouwen describes it: “One of the most obvious characteristics of our daily lives is that we are busy. We experience our days as filled with things to do, people to meet, projects to finish, letters to write, calls to make, and appointments to keep. Our lives often seem like overpacked suitcases bursting at the seams. In fact, we are almost always aware of being behind schedule. There is a nagging sense that there are unfinished tasks, unfulfilled promises, unrealized proposals. There is always something else that we should have remembered, done, or said. There are always people we did not speak to, write to, or visit. Thus, although we are very busy, we also have a lingering feeling of never really fulfilling our obligation.” We are always hurrying.

What’s wrong with hurrying? Any doctor, police officer, spiritual director, or over-worked mother, can answer that: Hurrying causes tension, high blood-pressure, accidents, and robs us of the simple capacity to be in the moment.

But spiritual writers take this further. They see hurry as an obstacle to spiritual growth. Donald Nicholl, for example, says “hurry is a form of violence exercised upon time”, an attempt, as it were, to make time God’s time our own, our private property. What he and others suggest is that, in hurrying, we exercise a form of greed and gluttony? How so?

Too often we have a rather simplistic notion of greed and gluttony. We imagine greed, for example, as hoarding money and possessions, as being selfish, hard-hearted, like Scrooge in the Dicken’s Christmas tale. Indeed, that kind of greed exists, though it’s not the prerogative of many. For most of us, greed takes a different, more subtle form. More than money, we hoard experience. We try to drink in the world, all of it. We would like to travel to every place, see everything, feel every sensation, not miss out on anything. We constantly hurry what we’re doing so as to be available to do something else. We try to juggle too many things at the same time precisely because we want too many things. The possessions we really want are experience, knowledge, sensation, achievement, status. We’re greedy in a way Scrooge never was.

Gluttony works essentially the same. For most of us, the urge to consume is not so much about food or drink, but about experience. Our propensity to over-eat (particularly in an age that is so sensitive to health and fashion) generally has little to do with food and infinitely more to do with other kinds of consumption. We are always in a hurry because we are forever restless to taste more of life. It's this kind of hurry, subtly driven by greed and gluttony, that can be a form of violence exercised upon time and can constitute an obstacle to holiness.

But there are other kinds of hurry that come from simple circumstance and duty. Almost everyone of us, at least during our working years, have too many things to do: Daily, we struggle to juggle the demands of relationships, family, work, school, church, child-care, shopping, attention to health, concern for appearance, house-work, preparing meals, rent and mortgage payments, car payments, commuting to and from work, bus schedules, unwanted accidents, unforeseen interruptions, illnesses, and countless other things that eat up more time than is seemingly available.

The gospels tell us that even Jesus was so busy at times that he didn't have time to eat. That's not surprising. Robert Moore once said that the mark of a true adult is that "he or she does what it takes". Sometimes that means being stretched to the limit, being over-extended, having to juggle too many things all at once, driving faster than we'd like, working to the point of exhaustion, even as there is still more that we should ideally be doing.

There's a hurriedness that doesn't come from greed or gluttony and that can't be dismissed with the simplistic judgement: "That's what she gets for trying to have it all!" Sometimes we have to hurry just to make do and simple circumstance and duty eat up every available minute of our time. That's not necessarily an obstacle to holiness, but can be one of its paths.

Still we have to be careful not to rationalize. God didn't make a mistake in creating time, God made enough of it, and when we can't find enough time and, as the Psalmist says, find ourselves getting up ever earlier and going to bed ever later because we have too much to do, we need to see this as a sign that sooner or later we had better make some changes. When we hurry too much and for too long we end up doing violence to time, to ourselves, and to our blood pressure.