

# COLIN DAVEY – FRUIT OF THE VINE

## *A REFLECTION BY A PARISHIONER ON A RECENT ARTICLE IN THE NEWSLETTER - RONALD ROLHEISER'S REASONS TO BELIEVE IN GOD*

Ronald Rolheiser's *Reasons to Believe in God*, which was included in a recent newsletter, offers a personal testament to the existence of God with persuasive clarity. To paraphrase: our inalienable moral structure is highly unlikely to have arisen by chance, but rather provides evidence of an intelligent goodness who deliberately built things this way. Our gifts of love, altruism, empathy and so forth serve to underline this view.

But hold on a minute, whispers NURTURE in my ear, surely that could be explained by social and cultural conditioning. First up, is it even true that we share an innate morality? After all, what's perfectly acceptable in one society can be abhorrent to another – slavery being just one example. Our current state of morality could just be the product of a long and difficult world history, rather than a contemporary outpouring of what's always been there. We do tend to think of ourselves as the very pinnacle of sophisticated development, long-distanced from the crude brutality of the past.

On an individual level, when things go seriously awry with a person's sense of right or wrong, it's often their childhood that is examined for an explanation of how and why they 'turned out' that way. Furthermore, the law prescribes an 'age of criminal responsibility', prior to which children are not deemed responsible for their actions. There's an implication from these various pointers that we are born a blank canvas and that social and cultural conditioning – parenting, school, church – shape us into moral adults. In fact, a primary purpose of upbringing is to impart the honesty and sincerity that Ronald Rolheiser suggests evidences God's existence in our lives. Without such guidance who knows what we might consider to be acceptable. A child abandoned in the forest and raised by wolves might well share the morality of the wolf.

Now NATURE is on my other shoulder: why do we strive to bring up our kids properly and make their lives better than our own? It's because it is in our nature to nurture, that's why; it feels like the right thing to do, naturally, just like the birds in springtime. Looking at the big picture, modern civilisations do share fundamental laws and underlying societal truths that allow their citizens to live together and get along: thou shalt not kill or steal; sorcery cannot be performed by persons with short hair; anything you eat on the way home from shopping doesn't count; and so on. Everything from The United Nations to your local charity shop reflect an underlying need to align cultural and societal diversity with such shared basic human principles. Equally, the ethical alien is a rare thing in popular culture, regardless of how technically advanced they are, as if to emphasize innate morality as a fundamental difference between us humans and them.

We're back where we started. In fact, we could just go round in circles because, realistically, both nature and nurture have shaped and polished you, me and Ronald Rolheiser to our present burnished splendour. We are given both the freedom to make choices and the predisposition to help others to choose wisely. As hinted above, there seems to be a natural window of vulnerability throughout childhood – witness the trial and error of teenage years – during which, exposed to the wrong influences, we can very easily make the wrong choices and be blown badly off course. Make it through those years, gain a little wisdom, and we're in calmer waters. That would explain why latecomers to the forest, like Kevin Costner, merely dance with wolves.