

Wrestling With God

Ronald Rolheiser

Coffee and Stretch Discussion Guide

Spring 2020

“Wrestling with God” Discussion Notes

1. Chapter 1: Wrestling for Self-Understanding Within a Complex Nature

A. Complex Beings in a Complex World.

- Rolheiser says “[n]o one is spared both the wondrous mystery and the confusing pathos of life’s complexity.” And there are no easy answers or formulas that can help us figure it out. As he describes it, “[g]ood art is good precisely because it takes that complexity seriously and shines a light on it in a way that doesn’t resolve the tension too easily.” According to Rolheiser, spiritual and religious leaders (both past and present) have seemingly lead us astray when they try to lead us to lives of simplicity and easy answers. In quoting Henri Nouwen, he points out that we are all just normal, complicated human beings walking around in human skin. We aren’t necessarily “overgreedy, oversexed, or overrestless.” But “our pathological complexity presses us toward ever greater light” and can become a place where we can find “threads of empathy and forgiveness”.

Discussion Questions: How has this idea played out in your spiritual life? Do you now (or have you in the past) found yourself struggling for simplicity or struggling with a lack of clarity on complicated questions? How have spiritual/religious leaders either helped or hindered your walk in this respect?

B. Understanding the Human Soul; and What it Means to Lose Ours.

- Rolheiser points out the philosophical view of a soul as a double principle inside every living being... the principle of energy, as well as the principle of integration. While seemingly abstract, our first-hand experience makes it easier to understand - like seeing a body devoid of life and energy. But because there are two parts to a soul, there are two ways to lose one. “Our vitality and energy can die or we can become unglued and fall apart.” Rolheiser talks about how we often interpret Jesus’ words “what does it profit you to gain the whole world but suffer the loss of your own soul?” The principle of energy as he refers to it is often associated with liberal world views; whereas the principle of integration is often associated with conservative world views. The “fire” and the “glue”. An integrated body and soul thriving, as against a body and soul in petrification or dissipation or disintegration. Both are needed and both are important — heaven and hell begin for Christians during this life.

Discussion Questions: How have you thought about Jesus’ words about becoming wealthy but suffer the loss of the soul? Is there validity in his point that it is about health and happiness in

this life, as much as it is about death and salvation? What is a soul? And what are some of the ways we nourish it? How would you describe the energy and integration principles of the soul?

C. Inner Grandiosity; Yearning for God without Realizing It.

-“We all nurse a deep, irrepressible sense that we are singularly special and destined for greatness. This condition besets all seven billion of us on this planet. Simply put, each of us cannot help but feel that he or she is the center of the universe.... This delusion is mostly unacknowledged, and we are generally ill-equipped to deal with it.” ... and yet... it’s the way God made us and we are made in God’s image, so....

-“God is fire, infinite fire, an energy that is relentlessly seeking to embrace and infuse all of creation.” It is thus difficult for us to make peace with this world because our innate longings and desires go far beyond anything we can achieve in this life — both in terms of outcomes and in terms of our understanding of the world around us. See pp. 26-27.

Discussion Questions: What does Rolheiser mean by the idea of grandiosity out of context — in a world that over-stimulates our innate desires, and is lacking in religious/spiritual and/or psychological/emotional tools to put it all into context? Can our churches and our schools do a better job of providing these tools, so that we can “live out our uniqueness and specialness, even as we make peace with our own mortality, our limitations, our frustrations, our anonymity, and create space for the uniqueness and specialness of everyone’s life.” And still acknowledge that “these gifts are not our own, that they come from God, and that all we are and achieve is God’s grace.”

D. The Ultimate Human Dichotomy.

-“Our natural instincts and spontaneous desires generally seem at odds with that toward which they are supposedly directed — namely, God and eternal life... But that’s not what happens most of the time. Generally, we are drawn ... toward the things of this earth: other people, pleasure, beautiful objects, sex, money, comfort.”

Discussion Questions: Why did God build us in one way; and then almost all of the time expect us to act in a way contrary to our instincts? Is it right to say “we simply shouldn’t feel this way”? Is it possible that they are, as Rolheiser suggests, “drawing us, persistently and unceasingly, toward God”? Is it possible that a man seeking out a prostitute is implicitly seeking the bread of life? What do you think about the idea that, despite our wanderings, we do in fact love God best, love our neighbor quite a bit... and, very happily, love whiskey and the other pleasures of life quite a bit as well?

E. The Perpetual Disquiet.

-The four transcendental qualities that are somehow true of everything that exists: oneness, truth, goodness, and beauty. Bernard Lonergan suggests that God somehow brands these four qualities into the core of the human soul (now that we fully understand what the soul is from our discussion above!). This is how we know right from wrong; how we know beauty; how we know love. It's always there lurking in the background and we are constantly aware of all that is lacking within us and in the world all around us.

Discussion Questions: What did you think about the idea of the last step in the creation of the soul being God's kiss of perfect love? Do you feel the longing that Rolheiser (and the philosophers that he quotes) describe as lying deep within our souls?

F. Virtue of the Spirit; Vulgarity of the Senses.

-Rolheiser talks about the tendency to view our spirit and our senses as a bit of a dichotomy standing in opposition to each other. And, more to the point, how religious leaders and institutions tend to emphasize the spirit and virtue and the need to be separate from or rising above feelings. While the secular world tends to emphasize feelings and the gratification (if deification) of the senses... because that's all there is. But, Rolheiser says, "our senses and our spirit both offer life, both are very important, and neither operates without the other."

Discussion Questions: What do you think about the idea that we are part mammal and equal part angel? And that the limited joys that can be experienced by mammals can become unlimited joys for humans? That our senses can make things real, while our spirit gives them meaning? Art without the soul is just a collection of colors on a canvas. Music without the soul is simply a collection of sounds. Poetry without the soul a mere collection of letters.

G. The Sacred and the Secular

-“We are irremediably children of both heaven and earth; both God and the world have a right to our attention ... We shouldn't expect that God wants us to shun earth, deny its genuine beauty, and step out of our bodies, our natural instincts, and our physicality in order to fix our eyes only on the things of heaven ... this world is its own mystery and has its own meaning, a God-given one. It's not simply a stage upon which we, as humans, play out our individual dramas of salvation and then close the curtain. It's a place for all of us ... to enjoy a home together”

Discussion Questions: How do we live within the tension, being torn between these two worlds? Is it really a tension? How does it manifest itself in your life? How do you imagine it manifests itself in Ron Rolheiser's life?

Chapter 2: Wrestling with Our Erotic Energies

A. Sex and Culture

- Rolheiser says that in the past century we have experienced three tectonic shifts in how our culture understands the place of sex in our lives. First, we moved away from the notion that sex is morally connected to procreation (and became comfortable with the idea of birth control). Second, we moved away from the notion that sex was reserved for marriage, such that today extra-marital sex is more the norm than the exception. Third, we decoupled sex from the concepts of love, emotion and commitment — to the point where “hook-up” sex is now actually a thing... deliberately cutting off sex from those emotions and concepts.

Discussion Questions: Do you agree? Do you see any additional shifts or movements in either direction? Do you think Rolheiser is correct that this idea of severing the tie between sex and marriage is naive?

B. Nature's Cruel Anomaly

- Rolheiser points out that nature is almost cruel in the way it fills young bodies with hormones and sexual energy at a time when they are emotionally and intellectually unprepared to understand and creatively channel that energy. When you combine the fact that people are physically maturing at younger and younger ages with the fact that they are getting married later and later in life, it creates a scenario that is almost untenable (20 years of sexual energy before being in a relationship designed to foster it). He goes on to point out that nature is trying to get them into the gene pool ... and God is in on the conspiracy.

Discussion Questions: What are some implications of these issues in the lives of our young people? Should people just get married at a younger age to stave off the flow of sexual energy and desire? How have those concepts affected your own understanding of human sexuality?

C. Making Love to the “Whole World”

- Rolheiser believes that at the core of sexual desires lies the inner grandiosity that he talked about in Chapter 1, where we are compelled to open our lives to something bigger than ourselves and become more and more like God.

Discussion Questions: Are there any similarities here to Jack London's "Call of the Wild" — nature's call over and against God's call? Does the idea that we are imprinted with a design similar to God's make sense to you?

D. What Should Churches Do

- Rolheiser says that churches need to more realistically acknowledge the brute power of sexuality in our lives and integrate sexual complexity more honestly into our spiritual lives. He also thinks that churches need to be far more empathetic and pastorally sensitive to struggles with sexuality.

Discussion Questions: Do you agree? Do you see any additional shifts or movements in either direction? Do you think Rolheiser is correct that this idea of severing the tie between sex and marriage is naive?

E. Squaring Our Aspirations with the Full Range of Human Fulfillments

- Charles Taylor suggests that the fact that "there is a tension between fulfillment and piety should not surprise us in a world distorted by sin ... but we have to avoid turning this into constitutive incompatibility." Naturalist writer Trevor Herriot draws parallels between proper stewardship of fossil fuels and the proper stewardship of sexual energy. Just as we are slowly learning that a short drive to the grocery store can have cumulative effects on climate change, small "but cumulatively significant" explosions of sexual energy can be just as destructive to our souls — even though they derive mainly from the overwhelming positive "longings to connect, merge, and be fruitful".

Discussion Questions: Wow? Do you agree with the connection? Would it have been easier to just say “sexual energy at its core is good, but the energy behind it has the power to greatly injure ourselves and others”? Is there something about our unwillingness to talk about sex that makes these comparisons uncomfortable?

F. Sexual Energy and Our Unfinished Symphony

- Rolheiser uses the story of Jephthah’s daughter (the odd story about the woman who is a virgin and agrees to be sacrificed, seemingly to mollify her father’s concerns about a prayer he made to God, and goes into the desert for 30 days to mourn the fact that she will die a virgin - notably not to go out on a 30-day bender to remedy the situation).

Discussion Questions: Do you agree? How does this tie back to the notion that there are four transcendental qualities stamped into us at the time of our creation — the perpetual disquiet to be reconciled to God?

Chapter 3: Wrestling with Fear

A. The Power of Fear

- Bieke Vandekerckhove says about the demons that beset her as she struggled with a terminal illness at age 19: "Sadness can be handled through tears, through grieving. Sadness fills us like a water glass but can be emptied... Sadness, no matter how heavy, has a release valve. So too does anger. Anger can be expressed and its very expression helps release it so that it flows out of us... We can shout in raged, beat drums, use profanity ... and rage away countless things. ...Fear, on the other hand, has no such release valves. Most often, there's nothing we can do to lighten or release it. Fear paralyzes us, and this paralysis is the very thing which robs us of the strength we would need to combat it."

Discussion Questions: Have you experienced this in your own life? Are there some instances when fear masks itself as sadness or anger? Is it true that sadness can really just be emptied or that anger can be lightened or released? What do you think about the story of the two Russian women waiting outside a Russian prison and being able name something, no matter how absurd or unfair, somehow frees us of it, allowing us to transcend it?

B. Religious Fears

- Rolheiser talks about his fears as a child (of snakes, of bullies, of monsters under the bed) and says that he was able to view conquering them more as an opportunity for growth. But not with his fear of death, fear of the afterlife and fear of God. These fears are the "last demons to be exorcised" ... and it's never really complete. He says that God accepts us (our wandering hearts, our fatigue, our need for cheap thrills, even our resistance to him) and that we can trust that God understands out humanity. This understanding can then lead to a healthy fear - one in which we aren't as much fearful of consequences as we are about how worthy we are of the trust that is given to us. "Like a loving mother ... God can handle our anger, self-pity, and resistance."

Discussion Questions: What are some some of your fears? Are there fears that you have been particular successful at overcoming? Others that are more of a struggle? What

do you think of the idea of “religious fears”? How is Rolheiser’s description of himself similar to Paul’s? What of the idea of an “easeful” friendship with God?

C. Holy Fear of God

-“Holy fear is love’s fear—namely, the kind of fear that is inspired by love. It’s a fear based upon reverence and respect for a person or a thing we love. ... We live in holy fear when we are anxious not to betray a trust or disrespect someone. But this is very different from being afraid of somebody or being afraid of being punished. Bad power and bad authority intimidate and make others afraid of them. God is never that kind of power or authority (emphasis mine). God entered our world as a helpless infant, and God’s power still takes that same modality. Babies don’t intimidate, even as they inspire holy fear.”

Discussion Questions: What does it mean for a fear to be “healthy and good, a sign of maturity and love”? How can we tell the difference between good fear and that kind of fear that blocks maturity and love? What do you think about the example of David who best exemplifies a healthy fear of God and the story of the temple bread? That “God is not so much a law to be obeyed as a gracious presence under which we are asked to creatively live”?

D. Fear of Hell

- “Hell is never a nasty surprise waiting for a basically happy person. Hell can only be the full flowering of a pride and selfishness that have, through a long time, twisted a heart so thoroughly that it considers happiness as unhappiness and has an arrogant disdain for happy people.”

Discussion Questions: What do you think of Rolheiser’s notion that Hell is never a nasty surprise, but of one considering happiness as unhappiness or of an arrogant disdain for happy people? Does it provide a sense of relief, a sense of conviction, or both? What do you think of Ron’s depiction of hell - that it is not so much a place as a state of being and intransigence? Does the rich man and the loaf of bread story ring true?

E. Trusting God as the Antidote to Fear

- Unconscious fears of God can cause us to lose sight of who God really is, according to Rolheiser (fear that God is not understanding or compassionate enough to save us, fear that God is not bighearted enough, fear that God only gives us one chance to get it right (even if we believe he forgives us, it's still there somewhere deep inside), fear that God doesn't understand or respect our humanity, fear that God is threatened by our success, by our doubts, etc, fear that God can't stand up to intellectual or scientific scrutiny, and fear that God is helpless before our moral helplessness). But that is not the God we believe in!

Discussion Questions: How much time do you spend trying to answer this perplexing question of just who God is? How do our unconscious fears cloud that reality? Do we believe in the same God as Ron?

-Chapter 4: Wrestling with the Gospel Mandate to Reach Out to the Poor

A. Being Good-Hearted is Not Enough.

- The concepts of charity and justice are oftentimes conflated. In distinguishing between the two, Rolheiser tells the story of two towns on a river with a bend such that each town could only see the portion of the river directly in front of them. As bodies floated by the people of the town that was downstream, they continually cared for and buried the bodies that floated in front of them, but never went upstream to see what was causing the bodies to be in the water in the first place. Rolheiser says “the lesson is clear enough: it’s one thing (needed, good and Christian) to take care of the needy bodies we find on our doorsteps, but it’s another thing (also needed, good and Christian) to go upstream to try to change the things that are causing those bodies to be in the river”

Discussion Questions: In what ways (if any) have you been impacted negatively by societal systems that are unjust? In what ways have you been impacted positively? What kinds of things should Christians and Christian churches be doing to move the needle on matters of social justice? What are some areas in which our church community has acted charitably? What are some areas in which our church community has acted for social justice? How can we do better?

B. Being Generous as a Matter of Law

- “[W]e need to see our giving not so much as charity but as obligation, as justice, as something we owe.” The law of Moses (and laws of many societies, including our own) have legally obligated people to give back to those less fortunate. Rolheiser talks about various biblical examples of re-distribution and/or re-generation: slaves freed every seven years; debts cancelled every seventh year; every seven years the land was to be laid fallow (with the poor reaping whatever the land produced that year). We see hints of this in some of our laws today... e.g., statutes of limitations, the rule against perpetuities, adverse possession, progressive income tax policy, etc., but through our understanding of property rights, have moved significantly in the other direction (as an aside, I’d be happy to lead a discussion on the history of state and federal property rights in the United States, but that is for another day).

Discussion Questions: What are other examples of existing legal obligations in the US and in NY to redistribute wealth and to provide for those less fortunate? What are examples of other policies that might tilt the scales more toward a socially just society? To what extent has the need for a constantly expanding economy and a constantly rising stock market made these kinds of social policies difficult if not impossible to implement? Are the ideas of legally mandated social justice consistent with the concepts of capitalism and free markets?

C. Giving as a Means of Staying Healthy

-“We need to give to the poor because they need it, admittedly; but we need to do it too because we cannot be healthy unless we do ... we tend to see [it] as something we are doing purely for someone else without realizing that our own health is a vital part of the equation.” “Wealth that is hoarded away corrupts those who possess it.” Aside from the Jewish scriptures, there are multiple teachings of Jesus on this topic that are all too familiar to us... and yet they sometimes sit deep within our consciousness without eliciting concrete action.

Discussion Questions: Is it true that there is a basic human need to be generous? To what extent have you witnessed seemingly benevolent acts of generosity turn into attempts to garner affection or influence? Have you seen examples where a lack of generosity with our gifts leads to a bitterness and decay of the soul as Rolheiser describes? What do you think of his description of judgment day and the idea that there will be only one set of criteria - how we gave to the poor?

D. A Message [to be] Taken Up by the Churches

- The track record of churches on the issues of charity and social justice is spotty. As a general rule, that track record has been stronger in the area of charity than it has in the area of social justice. A snapshot of Rolheiser’s Christian social doctrine: (i) all people have equal dignity and should enjoy equal access to resources and opportunity; (ii) God intended the earth for all people equally (property rights should be subordinated to this principle); (iii) the right to private property is not absolute; (iv) nobody should have surplus if others lack basic needs; (v) helping those in need is demanded by justice itself (not simply by personal virtue); (vi) capitalism must not be seen as morally inviolable and must be balanced by principles of the common good and justice; (vii) the earth is not simply a stage for human beings to live out their

lives, but is a creature of God's with its own rights that should not be violated; (viii) a world in which some lack basic needs while others have a surplus is immoral and goes against the teachings of Christ; (ix) the condemnation of injustice should be an essential part of the Church's teachings; and (x) there can be no spiritual health, individually or communally, without involvement in and movement toward the poor and the struggles of the poor (and riches of all kinds are dangerous).

Discussion Questions: What do you think of the Gospel of Prosperity? Do you agree that churches tend to emphasize private charity as opposed to social justice? Why do you suppose that is? What of Rolheiser's moral truths? Do you find them challenging? Are they realistic? Can you envision a world (or even a church community) in which they are lived out and fulfilled?

E. A Special Challenge in a Time of Refugees and Globalization

- "The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land; and the quality of justice in the land will always be judged by how orphans, widows and strangers fare while you are alive." Rolheiser goes on to note that "orphans, widows and strangers" is really scripture code for the three most vulnerable groups in a society. Now and throughout history, social justice has been religiously marginalized or even ignored. But the scriptures go out of their way repeatedly to point out that fallacy. And "mature discipleship doesn't depend upon our believing that we have it right, it depends only upon our doing right." "Not welcoming a stranger is antithetical to the very heart of Jesus's message..."

Discussion Questions: How does God's revelation sometimes come to us through the stranger and/or in what is most foreign to us? As you think about it, in our country, in our State and in our City, who are the most vulnerable? What about our legal systems and process (criminal justice, immigration, access to education, employment laws, wealth redistribution, tax laws, etc)? How should (or can) we go about (individually and as churches) bringing justice to the vulnerable through political change? Is voting necessary/enough?

F. A Healthy Attitude Toward Wealth

- The disparity between the rich and the poor continues to grow. It can be difficult to mitigate when our tendency at times may be to express indignation and frustration, while at the same time either (a) nursing a not-so-secret envy that we wish it were us or (b) being thankful that it is us while hoping others don't notice. As a society, we adore the rich and the famous and yet recognize as Christians that wealth is dangerous to both the soul and to society. Given this, Rolheiser makes three points about how this should affect our attitude toward wealth: (i) we should not idealize poverty and see wealth as a bad thing unto itself; (ii) we should not be too quick to politicize both poverty and wealth; and (iii) before attacking wealth, we should be sure that we are free from embittered moralizing or envy.

Discussion Questions: What do you think about Rolheiser's proposed attitudes toward wealth? Is he right that the important thing is to keep in mind how we use it and what it can do to our hearts? Is he missing out by not talking more broadly (to include concepts of education, opportunity, and oppression) and how we use those and what they can do to our hearts? What do you think about his notion of societal investment and the concept that we didn't get there on our own? How does this tie back to the broader concepts of education, opportunity and oppression?