

Restlessness is a Guide to Renewal

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All of the lectionary readings for today point to the *distance* between God and humans.¹ Hosea stresses how God loves his children, but they are “bent on turning away” from God. The Psalmist declares the Lord to be the one of *plenty*, whereas humans wander in desert wastes. *Colossians* says that Christ is all and in all, but we discriminate against people in hurtful ways. To human beings made in the image of God, too often we respond with anger, malice, or slander, not only as we see in the recent gun violence but also in smaller everyday acts of ordinary people.² And in Luke, Jesus says that *greed* motivates us to store up things of little value, whereas God is ever offering the things of greatest value.

These readings do not paint a pretty picture of human beings. We're driven mostly by selfishness and fear. We're a *mess*. Whatever you think of the Bible, it's totally accurate on this point. History and today's news prove it. What does God think about the mess we're in? Some scriptures say God's pretty frustrated with us, but by and large they say God feels compassion for us and is merciful. But, if that's all we get from the readings—that God feels sorry for us and won't hold it against us that we're so messed up—then we've missed the really good news.

One reason I'm attracted to the Gospels and Paul is that they both stress something much more life affirming for humans: the *hope of glory*: we—you and I and everyone else—can get a whole lot *better*. We can be healed, renewed, and empowered to live flourishing lives in harmony with our environment, other people, and the divine. Christianity, the real thing, is at once totally realistic about our messed up human lives and also full of hope about our future, because it offers a *bridge* for human transformation from fear and selfishness to freedom and love for all creation. Today's reading from Colossians puts this in terms of the *new self's* being *renewed*.

¹ Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21.

² In the last week there have been mass shootings in Gilroy, El Paso, and Dayton.

How does this transformation work? For almost all of us almost all of the time, the answer is: *very slowly*, incrementally, step-by-step. It isn't going to be fully accomplished any time soon. Paul says that humanity's full glory won't be revealed until Christ comes again with a new heavens and new earth. But Paul stresses that we can make substantial progress here and now. Indeed, we should seek to become Christ-like here and now because that is what the good life consists in. Do you really want to live a good, purposeful life? The New Testament is very clear about this: then follow Jesus. It will, paradoxically, take you out of your old self in service to others where you'll end up finding yourself, and when you find yourself, you'll find you're part of a whole that includes everything else, too.

So, how do we *foster* this growth toward the good life? Today I want to discuss one pathway that doesn't get much press and might have escaped your attention: *Restlessness*: a nagging feeling of unease, agitation, disquiet. Have you felt it? It might be hard to put your finger on what it's about. Restlessness is a general feeling that something's just not quite right with your life. Usually we try to overcome restlessness by *pushing it down* (repressing it) or trying to *work through* it. You might feel guilty over your restlessness. You might think, "Who am I to feel restless with my life? Lots of people would be *ecstatic* to have what I have!". But, what I'm here to say today is this: if you'll pay attention to your restlessness, you might be surprised by its power to improve your life. Indeed, the fact that you're experiencing this agitation, this unease, is actually a sign that you're primed to *grow*.

In a recent podcast, Rob Bell talks about the power of restlessness to transform us through progressing forms of life.³ Think of forms of life as psychological containers that structure the various patterns or roles we play out in our lives. A form of life is a more or less general kind of practice or role that you repeat over and over. For instance, your *job* is a form of life; so is the specific way you *approach* doing your job. Being a parent is a form of life, and so is being a

³ A number of the ideas I discuss here were sparked and influenced by Bell, Rob, "An Anatomy of Restlessness", *The Robcast*, episode 231, February 24, 2019. <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/an-anatomy-of-restlessness/>

student, a teacher, a spouse, a tradesperson, etc. And there are more *specific* forms of life within general ones. For example, some parents utilize an authoritarian form of discipline, whereas others engage in a more flexible form.

Have you ever participated in a form of life that worked well for you for a while but then it *stopped* working for you? Maybe you were elated to get that *first job*. You could hardly believe your luck. You threw yourself into it with joy, and for a while it served you well. It improved your life. It met your needs. Until the time came when it didn't any more. You began to feel restless. Eventually you realized you'd need a new form of job life in order to achieve what you were finding you really wanted.

Some of you grew up in a *fundamentalist* or *evangelical* church, a church whose form of life may have given you what you needed for a time. It gave you a new purpose, and helped you make sense of your life. But, then a time came when you began to feel ill at ease, unsettled, edgy, and eventually you realized that *that* form of life, the very one that had been so important and enriching to you, *no longer* was sustaining or supporting the person your spirit was moving you toward. To grow, to expand into that new person, you needed a *new form* of religious life.

Sometimes the form of life you're in is fine but you need a new *animating spirit*. An animating spirit is what empowers a form of life. Two people could have the same form of life, say, the same job, but one is animated by a spirit of excitement and the other person is animated by a spirit of boredom and dread. Sometimes restlessness is a sign of a harmful animating spirit. Perhaps you're participating in a good form of life in your job or your marriage or your schooling or your church, but a spirit of *jealousy*, or *entitlement*, or *greed*, or *envy* has wormed its way in. These animating spirits are like poison to a form of life. So, it's important to be *honest* with yourself about what's causing your restlessness. You may need to set aside some special time for solitude, reflection, and meditation in order to discern whether your restlessness is calling out for a new form of life, or whether it's a sign of a destructive animating spirit. A life-giving spirit will take you through ever progressing forms of life, but a destructive spirit will stop your spiritual growth in its tracks.

One of the worst things we can do with restlessness is stubbornly *double down* on a form of life that's worked for us in the past, refusing to open ourselves up to new possibilities. I remember about a year ago when I began to feel very uneasy about my relationship with my wonderful daughter. She was going through the normal changes of adolescence, and I was clinging to the same old parenting style that had worked so well for many years. It wasn't working any more. Eventually I realized I needed to change my form of parenting my daughter. Every parent goes through something like this.⁴ Some parents take their agitation as a clue to change their form of parenting, but we all know of parents who stubbornly stick to some old authoritarian form, because they've been taught that that's the only right way to do it.

Many of us have been taught by our culture that our feelings and desires are *not to be trusted*. We've been taught that there are specific, *unvarying* forms for success in life, for parenting correctly, for a political system, for a love relationship, etc. We've been taught that if you feel uneasy about these forms, then the problem must be *you*. This assumption is prevalent in many of our Christian subcultures. Many of us were taught that, when it comes to religion, our personal feelings and desires are not trustworthy. Many of our evangelical brothers and sisters say that the Bible is the only trustworthy guide; so, we should disregard our feelings and desires, and discipline ourselves to fit into the biblical interpretation that has been handed down to us, whatever it is.⁵ Of course, distrusting our personal experiences is not limited to conservative groups: even people raised in more liberal churches are often taught that only tradition and reason may be trusted along with scripture.

My friends, this is exactly wrong and ironically contrary to the trajectory of the scriptures, especially in the Gospels and Paul. First of all, we're *made in the image of God*. So, despite being a mess, we're *fundamentally good* at our deepest level of being. If we can get into touch with *that*, we've got something we can

⁴ My daughter and I even wrote a screenplay, *Trusting Chloe* (now in production), about this issue. See <https://igg.me/at/trustingchloe> and <https://trustingchloe.jimdofree.com>.

⁵ This is, of course, an oversimplified observation; for example, many charismatic evangelicals give personal experience pride of place in Christian life.

trust. Second, Jesus promised us he would send his Holy Spirit to guide us, to convict us, and comfort us. That spirit works in relation to our own spirit through our very experiences. So, if you're trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you're trusting in your experiences. Third, Paul tells us—over and over again—that we're *a new creation*. As we noted in our reading from *Colossians*, we Christians have a new self that is being *renewed* in knowledge. Renewal requires changes in our experiences. New knowledge always comes by way of new experiences.

Indeed, not trusting your deepest feelings and desires can lead you *astray* from the path of spiritual growth. Consider the standard teaching among early American Christians that slavery was a good thing, positively supported by the Bible as a God-ordained political reality. For white people to treat slaves as *property* rather than as *persons* required them to ignore their experiences of people of color as fellow human beings, made in the image of God. Can you imagine what the world would be like today had all white American Christians doubled down on the prevailing Christian teaching of their day? Can you imagine what our society would be like had there not been a courageous group of people who let their *feelings of compassion* overrule the prevailing Christian norms?

Examples like these reveal the power for good that our feelings and desires can have. But, you might remain suspicious. Even if our feelings *can* do some good, aren't they fickle and undependable? Don't we all know people whose feelings and desires led them disastrously astray? I'll address this worry in two ways. First, in the New Testament we have *signposts* to guide us (although few Christians have had the courage to trust them). Jesus and Paul tell us over and over again what the Kingdom of God is like: it is a world in which those in slavery are freed, those who are hungry are fed, those who are sick are healed, those who are last become first, and people work together for the common good of all. And Paul tells us that the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. My first point is that these signposts should serve as guides for relying on our feelings.

You want to know whether trusting in your inner life is leading you *well*? God's way will always lead you toward expansion, inclusiveness, freedom,

spaciousness in which there is more for everybody. If your feelings and experiences motivate you toward tribalism, nationalism, or social elitism, if they lead you to support the wealthy and powerful over the poor, if they lead you to promote social structures that favor you and those like you at the expense of others, then you're not trusting the biblical signposts no matter what scripture or tradition you're relying on. But, if your feelings, desires, and experiences are moving you toward paths that liberate people, promote joy and inclusiveness, nurture peace, elevate beauty, welcome more people to the table of life that, my friends, is the juice of life. As *Colossians* has it, when you're being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your creator, you'll become increasingly aware that there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free. Since that list doesn't exactly hit home in 21st century America; so how about this one: to those being renewed by their creator, there is no longer American and Arab, no longer black and white, no longer gay and straight, no longer the valuable rich person and the unimportant poor person, but Christ is all and in all!

The second thing I have to say about the worry of trusting your own inner life is this. I'm not talking about your *passing feelings*. We all have bad days when we don't feel loving and expansive. I'm talking about that *nagging sense* that something important isn't right in your life. It stays with you. It rears its head from time to time despite your efforts to ignore it. As I mentioned, it could be that your problem isn't a form of life but a bad animating spirit. That's why it's crucial to reflect on your *deepest desires* so you can discern whether you need a *new spirit* or a *new form* of life. One thing you can be sure of: God is always calling you forward for renewal; so pay attention to your life, especially what's deepest within you. If God is going to call you, the call is going to come through your own life. That means it's going to come to you in your own experiences and through your own thoughts and desires. "The Kingdom of God is within you", Jesus said (Luke 17:21). So, don't be afraid of what's deep inside you. Don't be afraid of your restlessness. Think of your restlessness as a friend, a sign pointing to where you need to go next. Amen.