



“Spirituality and the Seasons of our Lives”

Retreat – Oblate School of Theology
April 30 – May 3rd, 2023

John Mark Comer, David Pocta,
Ron Rolheiser

Spirituality – One Size doesn't fit all!

1. Distinguishing the seasons of life in terms of spirituality

- Some of the important work being done today in the field of spirituality; e.g., Richard Rohr.
- One size doesn't fit all!
 - Jesus' invitations in the Gospels – challenging us at different stages of our lives
 - The classical mystics – and their concept of stages of the spiritual life
- A salient metaphor: Nikos Kazantzakis - the two great struggles in life, "wrestling with the devil and wrestling with God"
- Negative examples: What happens when we don't do this? *The "Martha-Mary" tension





Spirituality – One Size doesn't fit all!

2. We can divide the spiritual journey into three distinct phases:

- i) **Essential discipleship** – “The struggle to get our lives together”
- ii) **Generative discipleship** – “The struggle to give our lives away”
- iii) **Radical discipleship** – “The “struggle to give our deaths away”

A scenic view of a paved path lined with trees in bloom, with a white fence in the background. The path is flanked by lush green grass and trees with vibrant yellow and pink blossoms. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

Spirituality – One Size doesn't fit all!

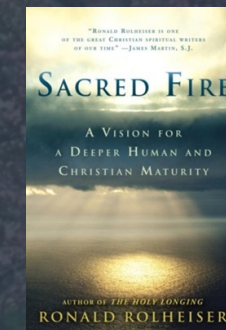
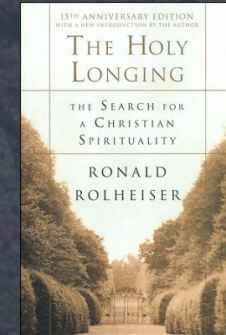
3. How these compare to the categories of the classical mystics?

- Essential discipleship = “the dark night of senses”
- Generative discipleship = “proficiency”
- Radical discipleship = “the dark night of the spirit”

Spirituality – One Size doesn't fit all!

4. Footnote – My own work on this

- *The Holy Longing* – outlining Essential discipleship
- *Sacred Fire – A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity* – outlining Generative discipleship
- *Insane for the Light – Giving our Deaths Away* – outlining Radical Discipleship





Essential Discipleship – “Struggling to get our lives together”

1) The struggles towards initial, essential discipleship - "wrestling with the devil", the powerful, chaotic energies of youth:

a) Images for the struggle:

*Biblically - the struggle of the prodigal son

*Mystically - "the dark night of the senses"

*Anthropologically - "to leave home and find your way back come home"

*Poetically - "the holy longing"

Essential Discipleship – “Struggling to get our lives together”

b) The chaotic energies of the first-half of life: *"From being driven out of home by puberty to coming home again"*

*eros ... the sheer pulse for life

*sexuality ... its brute force inside us

*restlessness ... our congenital insatiability

*loneliness ... our distance from intimacy

*insubstantiality ... the struggle for meaning, personal identity, significance, and self-worth

*inchoate moral desire ... the struggle for moral rectitude

*inchoate nostalgia ... to "come home", to roots, to moral companionship, to quiet, to solitude.

*temptations ... pleasure, comfort, affluence, power



Essential Discipleship – “Struggling to get our lives together”

2) It usually takes 10-20 years to "come home", to achieve Generative Discipleship

3) Supplemental – Richard Rohr’s five principles for initiation into maturity

i. Life is hard!

ii. You are going to die!

iii. You are not that important!

iv. You are not in control!

v. Your life is not about you!

Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

1) Images for the struggle...

*Biblically - "Jesus' active ministry", "the rich young man", Radiating God's Compassion, "washing each other's feet",

*Anthropologically - "carrying life", being an "Elder"

*Mystically - "proficiency"

*Hindu Spirituality - "householder", "Forest-Dweller"



Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

i) How does this transition take place?

- a. The analogy of weather changing
- b. This usually happens by conscriptive rather than volition
- c. Love as the transformative elements

- *All miracles begin with falling in love – Morris West*



Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

ii) Two seasons to this stage in life ...

- **Early Generativity** – *breathing one kind of air into the world*
- **Late Generativity** – *breathing another kind of air into the world*

Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

iii) Early Generativity - "Initial maturity" until "Retirement"

▪ Characteristics of Early "Generativity" ...

- an essentially transformed motivation (broken the pleasure principle)
- an essential identity
- an essential integrated sexuality (which lets you sleep at night and stay within your commitments)
- carrying life rather than being carried
- an essentially "comfortable" and at ease (beyond the tumultuous restlessness of youth)



Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

- a growing "solicitude"
- Generally, a time when you are busy, habitually conscripted by duty, and pretty clear on what you should be doing.



Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

- **Practical Struggles during this season**

- Busyness
- Pressure
- Finances
- Mid-life crisis

Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

- **Religious Struggles during this season**
 - disillusionment and the potential to revert to immaturity
 - the longing for another "honeymoon"
 - boredom and resentment of duty
 - joylessness - bordering on anger
 - the tendency to busyness as an escape
 - lack of gratitude and lack of awareness of privilege

Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

iii) Late Generativity and the Invitation to a different kind of Generativity.

- **When do these years begin?**
 - *The concept of "Forest-Dwelling"*
- **Struggles during this season**
 - The (often unconscious) search for new meaning
 - The need for an **archetypal transition**
 - to being a "magus"/ from being a "lover" (husband)

Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

○ to being a "Sophia" from being a lover (wife)

🏡 An outline re our Archetypal energies

❖ *Father/King – Mother/Queen*

❖ *Prophet*

❖ *Magus/Sophia*

❖ *Lover*

Generative discipleship ... "Struggling to Give our lives for others"

- The movement from being a “householder” to becoming a “Forest-Dweller”
 - *The Stages of Life within Hindu Anthropology and Spirituality*
 - *Child*
 - *Student*
 - *Householder*
 - *Forest-Dweller*
 - *Sannyasin*
- An inchoate nagging beneath the surface begins to beckon us.

Radical Discipleship – “The struggle to give our deaths away”

- *Nouwen: At a certain point in our lives the question is no longer: "What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution?" But: "How can I now live so that my death will be an optimal blessing to my family, the church, and the world?" The central question is not, 'How much time remains?' but rather, 'How can we prepare so that our dying will be a new way for us to send our spirit and God's spirit to those whom we have loved and who have loved us?' (Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift*, N.Y., HarperOne, 2009, p xvi) ...*
- *Nouwen – our lives belong not just to us but also to others. This applies to our deaths as well. If we die with guilt, shame, anger, or bitterness, all of that becomes part of our legacy to the world, binding and burdening the lives of our family and friends. It is possible, on the other hand, to regard our dying as a gift – and opportunity to pass along to others our own sense of peace with God. (Ellsberg, pp. 84-85)*



Radical Discipleship – “The struggle to give our deaths away”

- *At some point in life we should stop working on our agenda and begin to work on our obituary.*
- *A hermeneutical key: "Home is where we start from." (T.S. Eliot)*



Radical Discipleship – “The struggle to give our deaths away”

1) Images for the struggle:

- a. Biblically: "Jesus' Passion", "the nakedness of Job", "Abraham and Sarah" (new call and new pregnancy late in life).
- b. **Mystically** - "the dark night of the spirit"
- c. **Anthropologically** - "to leave home again"
- d. **Poetically** - "insane for the light"
- e. **Hindu Spirituality** - "being the Sannyasin"
- f. **Richard Rohr** - "being the holy old fool"
 - i. "the pathetic old fool"
 - ii. "the embittered old fool"
 - iii. "the holy old fool"





Radical Discipleship – “The struggle to give our deaths away”

- 2) **An elaboration of the key concept**
 - a. *The concept of passion - as PASSIO*
 - b. *Jesus as giving "his death" for us.*
 - c. *The final challenge of our lives.*
 - d. *"Blood and water" as pouring out after death*
 - e. *The aging and death process as “purgatory”*



Radical Discipleship – “The struggle to give our deaths away”

3) The struggles to become "the holy old fool" - the energies of mid-life and beyond: Moving towards gratitude and forgiveness

- *From Anger to Gratitude*
- *From Bitterness to Forgiveness*
- *From letting our wounded ego resist love to letting ourselves be loved*
- *From sophistication to simplicity*

Supplemental - Some Secular views that complement this vision

Germaine Greer – *The Change – Women, Aging, and the Menopause.*



*The "stages" of a woman's life

-*Infancy*

-*Nubility*

-*Wifehood/parenthood*

-*Menopause*

-*"Crone"*

Supplemental - Some Secular views that complement this vision

Kathleen Dowling Singh – Aging and Dying as “calibrated to bring us into the realm of spirit”



- a. Our self-consciousness as radically limiting our awareness
- b. A pre-self-conscious baby as “luminous”
- c. The formation of our ego (self-consciousness) as predicated on four massive “contractions”
 - i. Our separation of self from other
 - ii. Our separation of life from death
 - iii. Our separation of mind from body
 - iv. Our separation of our own luminosity and complexity from our conscious awareness – the formation of our shadow
- d. The process of aging and death as breaking down these contractions and putting us again into the wide realm of reality.