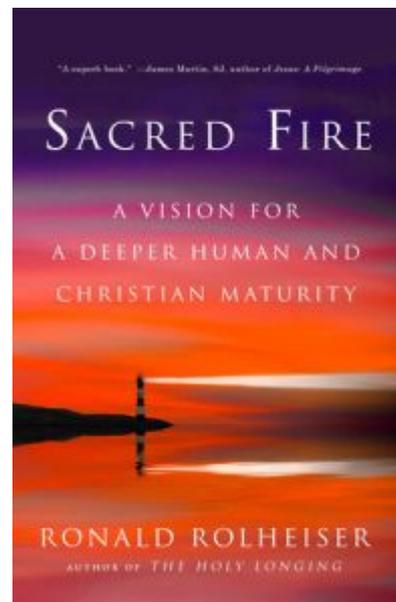


# Review: Sacred Fire – A Vision for A Deeper Human and Christian Maturity

Like many life-long Christians, my formative years were shaped by speakers and writers fanning the flames of zeal and purpose. We wanted to know God's plan for our life. It was about learning our gifts, keeping pure, and pursuing Jesus for the life that lay stretched out before us. We would change the world!



There's nothing wrong with that. Three of my four children are now, officially, young adults, and I want something similar for them. Opportunities lie open before them. They don't fully realise their sheer *potential*. So push into Jesus, equip yourself with his Word, become familiar with his Spirit, find healing for childhood hurts, and launch forth! "I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:13).

We all grow out of our youth and into our adult seasons. And the discipleship that once formed us no longer fits as easily. We try and make it work. We take our sermons and channel our inner youth: fan your passion into flame, live life for Jesus! We mentor others by setting and pursuing goals, just like we did when the vista was young and wide. And we do the same with our churches: we place our communities on an horizon of opportunities, articulate some mission *action* goals and motion for them to launch forth like the youth we once were.

Occasionally it works.

Our forms of discipleship are youth-shaped, even as we hit our middle age. They don't hit the mark. This is where we need the sort of wisdom Ronald Rolheiser offers in *Sacred Fire*.

Rolheiser's framework is simple. He identifies three stages of discipleship in our walk through life:

1) **Essential Discipleship:** *The struggle to get our lives together.* This is the youth-oriented form of discipleship with which we are familiar. It's for when we are *searching*, "for an identity... for acceptance... for a circle of friends... for intimacy... for someone to marry... for a vocation... for a career... for the right place to live... for financial security... for something to give us substance and meaning – in a word, *searching for a home*" (page 16, emphasis mine). "Who am I? Where do I find meaning? Who will love me? How do I find love in a world full of infidelity and false promises" (page 17)? We are familiar with these things.

2) **Mature Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our lives away.* This covers the majority of adult life, and begins when we become "more fundamentally concerned with life beyond us than with ourselves" (Page 18). The transition from young adult to responsible parent typifies the entry into this stage of life. "The struggle for self-identity and private fulfillment never fully goes away; we are always somewhat haunted by the restlessness of our youth and our own idiosyncratic needs... [However the] anthropological and spiritual task will be clear: How do I give my life away more purely and more generously?" (page 18). This is the substance and focus of the book.

3) **Radical Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our deaths away.* As we age, the default line shifts a second time. The question is no longer "What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution? Rather, the question becomes: How can

I now live so that my death will be an optimal blessing for my family, my church, and the world?" (page 19). Rolheiser touches on this at the end.

Perhaps the quote from Nikos Kazantzakis on the very first page, sums it up: Three prayers for "three kinds of souls".

- 1) *I am a bow in your hands, Lord, draw me lest I rot.*
- 2) *Do not overdraw me, Lord, I shall break.*
- 3) *Overdraw me, Lord, who cares if I break!*

It is the second of these that we need to explore.

**In this stage of life, the aspiration is not towards heroism, but towards *eldership*** (page 64). Rolheiser doesn't go into it, but my reflection is that eldership has diminished in our collective imagination. Take any popular movie (my thoughts jump to *Happy Feet*) and it pits zealous youth against repressive elders: youthful explorations of real experiences against the oppression of traditions and the narrowness of a self-loathing parental generation. It's an effective narrative; even now, my heart flutters with some longing to be the heroic youngster. But I'm getting old. I also long to cover, care, nurture, and father. I yearn to pass on some of the depths and ancient learnings that I discovered on my own youthful quests, and which I have digested over many years.

Eldership is valuable, so how do we disciple people towards eldership? How do we disciple people in their maturity?

This collision occurs in the church world. We promote (and fund) *avant garde* pioneering programs and strategies that promote church growth. There's a risk of it being seen as just a young person's game. That isn't the case. I realised some time ago, that I simply ain't the green young church planter I used to be (thank God). I'm not going to be able to grow a church, or pioneer something new, through my waning youthful zeal. It will only come through growing into and resting upon

a developing *eldership*. That's the discipleship I need, and Rolheiser has helped me.

I no longer need to explore paths of youthful imagination. I need to fathom the depths of when the patterns of life are "pretty bland, or flat, or overpressured, or disappointing" where underneath the (relative) stability of life "is an inchoate, nagging disquiet, that is stirring just enough to let us know that someday, though not quite yet, there are still some deeper things to sort out and a deeper journey to be made" (pages 65-67).

One of Rolheiser's more powerful images is that of the "honeymoon." Perhaps it sums up the dynamics of a mid-life crisis!

*Our route to maturity generally involves a honeymoon or two. Honeymoons are real, are powerful, and afford us, this side of eternity, with one of the better foretastes of heaven. Because of that they are not easy to let go of permanently. Inside of every one of us there is the lingering itch to experience that kind of intensity yet one more time..." (Pages 69-70)*

We could be driven by that allure for honeymoon excitement, not just in terms of marital fidelity, but simply as a fantasy of what "success" means to us ("grandiosity" as Rolheiser calls it). Starry-eyed youth run to their honeymoons, thinking to have escaped loneliness. In our mature years, we learn to embrace a "new loneliness, that of seeing and accepting the actual limits of our own lives, a pain intertwined with accepting our own mortality" (page 74).

If there is one bit of wisdom to dwell on from this book, this is it.

All discipleship equips, and Rolheiser does just that: He unpacks workaholism. He looks at "acedia" – that noontday

listlessness and ennui mixed with a daydream of regret and jealousy (pages 79-81), and the answering hope. He looks at forgiveness and how it is needed at the most existential level (page 83). He even unpacks all the seven deadly sins in helpful and insightful ways! Sloth, for instance, is not laziness so much as wilful distraction (I'm looking at you, Netflix). He teaches us to pray (page 169ff), with emotional honesty and life-giving rhythms. And he reminds us to bless and not curse (page 212). Chapter 8 sums it all as "ten commandments for the long haul."

It was gratifying to find myself familiar with some of what he expounds. Gill and I have reflected for some years on how life is so often a divine call to *wait*. Our world is now-and-not-yet, and this can feel like Easter Saturday, or the days between Ascension and Pentecost. Just like Rolheiser, we also have drawn on the road to Emmaus (page 98ff) to grasp the depression and despondency of what this can feel like, despite the (unrealised) company of Jesus on the road. We too have encountered the painful compulsion of Peter (page 105), as we are bound to the one who has the words of eternal life, despite the costly road on which we are led and where often we don't wish to go. In the words of one of the songs that inspired me in my youth, but which I didn't understand until I had lost some blood: **"I know who I am, I know where I've been, I know sometimes love takes the hard way."**

In all good discipleship, we need to be both affirmed and stretched. This book stretches us towards the giving away of life that defines our age and stage. We are stretched towards kenotic living, and laying down of pride and judgementalism, superiority, ideology, and personal dignity (page 124). We are compelled to imagine living as ones baptised into Jesus, not just baptised into John: i.e. baptised into "grace and community" and reliance on the one who can do the impossible. Pentecost comes not to the self-hyped and activated, but to "a church meeting where men and women, frightened for their

future, were huddled in fear, confusion, and uncertainty, but were gathered in faith and fidelity despite their fears.” (page 131). We cannot live our lives out of “sheer willpower” (page 130). I know; I tried that once ten years ago and I broke.

The way of mature discipleship is to give away our life. It is Paul sharing in the sufferings of Christ. It is Mary, watching the crucifixion, not running, but absorbing the pain and refusing to “conduct its hatred” (page 149). Sometimes, the Lord places us as walls upon which the ugliness of a broken world breaks, and upon which the sulfurous sharpness of an idolatrous church sloshes. In our youth we might fight back. But in our maturity, we absorb, we bow, we break, and all that the stooping does is put our faces closer to the Rock on which we rest.

*That is not the same thing as despair. Our muted helplessness is not a passive resignation, but its opposite. It is a movement toward the only rays of light, love, and faith that still exist in that darkness and hatred. And at that moment, it is the only thing that faith and love can do. (Page 149)*

We need this sort of discipleship. We need this sort of imagining of what mature leadership, mature lives, mature ministry looks like. We need a church that can cope with being out of control, that can lean into decline and devote what is left as an offering of blessing. We need a church that finds faith in pain, and just simply *is* as the winds and waves of the world wash around.

We need to inspire our youth, and delight in their zeal (and their pretensions at times). And us older ones need to aspire to eldership, and give away our lives.