



Foreword

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL! That isn't just true of clothing; it's true, also, of spirituality and discipleship.

The invitations that Jesus gives us to ultimately be perfect as God is perfect grow deeper and deeper as we mature in life. What discipleship asks of us in mid-life or when we are facing death is not the same as what it asks of us in our twenties, when we are still trying to find ourselves. For example, during the first half of life, success can teach us some valuable lessons. During the second half of life, success still feels good and we yearn for it, but it has much less to teach us and can, in fact, be a hindrance to real growth. The different seasons in our lives call for a different depth in terms of discipleship.

When we look at the Gospels, as well as at the classical Christian mystics, we see that discipleship, following of Christ, has three basic levels. We might name them: *Essential Discipleship*, *Generative Discipleship*, and *Radical Discipleship*.

Simply put: *Essential Discipleship* is that part of life where we are *trying to get our lives together*; *Generative Discipleship* is that part of life when we are *trying to give our lives away*; and *Radical Discipleship* is that part of life where we are *trying to give our deaths away*.

What does that mean?

We are born into a home and we get to live there until we reach puberty. Puberty is designed by God and by nature to





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drive us out of our homes into the world where we need to create our own homes. This is the first real part of our own spiritual journey and sometimes it takes many years before we find our way back home again, to a place where we have found a life partner, a vocation, a job, a meaning, and a home of our own. That is the struggle to come to *Essential Discipleship*. Sometimes, sadly, we never get there.

But once we do get there, the struggle changes. Now it is no longer a question of finding ourselves but of giving our lives away in generosity and service of others—family, church, country, world. The struggle now is to be *generative*, to live lives that make a difference, to find ever deeper ways to give ourselves over. This is what the mystics call *Proficiency*. Ideally we will spend most of the years of our adult lives in this stage, namely, *Generative Discipleship*, trying to give our lives away.

However, as T.S. Eliot says: *Home is where we start from!* Just as we had to leave the home we were first born into, we, too, have to leave this place in our lives, the home we created for ourselves. Nobody exits this planet alive and there comes a time when our spiritual task is not so much that of giving our lives away but that of *giving our deaths away*. Henri Nouwen put it this way: There comes a point in life where the question is no longer: How can I live my life so that I make a difference? How can I live so as to give myself more deeply to others? Rather the question becomes: How can I now live so that when I die my death will be an optimal blessing for my family, the Church, and my community? That is the task of *Radical Discipleship*, something the mystics called “the dark night of the Spirit” and that is what Jesus illustrates for us when he undergoes his passion and death.

The Holy Longing is a book that deals mainly with the first two levels: *Essential* and *Generative Discipleship*. Its intent is to try to offer guidance in terms of the struggle to get our lives together and to give them away in love and service.





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And underneath this basic intent, there is a secondary one: When Eric Major (formerly the Religious Editor at Doubleday) asked me to write *The Holy Longing*, he worded his request this way: “Write a book that I can give to my adult children that will explain to them why I still believe in God and go to church — and that I can read myself on those days when I’m not so sure any more why I believe in God and go to church!” He knew what was needed. We live in a time of great freedom, great pluralism, and great confusion. We need someone to help us name the essentials. *The Holy Longing* tries to do that and *Longing for the Holy* is a huge help in highlighting those essentials and making suggestions as to how we might integrate them more into our lives.

May this faith-sharing resource help you outstrip me in understanding, generosity, and discipleship!

Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I.
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