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**Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home in Times of Loneliness*. Toronto, ON: Image Books, 2004.**

In urban Canada, especially in the three metropolitan centres of Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver where fully one-third of Canada's population live, people are experiencing an unprecedented depth of loneliness.

It's a complex condition, not to be dismissed lightly. Ronald Rolheiser, born and raised in Saskatchewan, digs into that complexity as a priest, counsellor, spiritual director, and theologian. He currently serves his Oblate order as head of their theological college in San Antonio, TX. For more on his work and witness, visit [www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com). He describes the many forms loneliness takes, the dangers it poses, and the possibilities for maturing as human beings that it offers. His litanies of feelings that constitute and flow from loneliness, some of which I've tried to capture in this book note, evoke its power for good and ill in wonderful ways.

Early in the book, he quotes a haunting phrase from Karl Rahner, a seminal twentieth-century theologian from the Roman Catholic branch of Christ's church – "the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable." (x) Rolheiser found that this phrase caught the core longing of human beings for a relationship with their Creator, with other human beings, and with the creation. But that longing can never be satisfied with the antidotes offered in the modern Western culture of materialism and individualism.

Rolheiser explores four interconnected reasons for the growing epidemic of loneliness. First, increased leisure time creates a psychic restlessness with no meaningful focus, so we are pushed into loneliness. Second, society is undergoing severe fragmentation as smaller family units emerge, people are more mobile, and individual freedom is more valued, so people feel disconnected and lonely. Three, the pace of change disrupts stability and safety, so people feel

threatened in their loneliness. Fourth, advertising bombards us with goods we cannot attain, so people develop a profound sense of inadequacy and, in their shame for that, loneliness.

Six dangers emerged from these trends, according to Rolheiser. They diminish human intimacy. They keep us stuck in unrealistic fantasies of satisfaction through goods and services. They drive decisions that settle for dehumanizing substitutes for real human intimacy. They make us hardened and insensitive, ignoring our own pain as well as that of others. They submerge us in “a cauldron of confusion” in which restlessness, emptiness, nostalgia, longing, alienation, and paranoia boil over. And they lead to a “dark night of the soul” in which we are wearied, tired, tormented, and weakened. That is the depth of the pain of loneliness.

Rolheiser finds reductionist and inadequate the remedies for this dis-ease that rely solely on humanistic measures. They do not get to the deep roots of loneliness. Those roots are found in the wisdom of the Judeo-Christian scriptures in the notion of sin as alienation from God. Replenishing these broken roots requires divine intervention to put it into proper perspective. Within that frame of reference, loneliness is a gift to be cherished in the midst of the pain it causes. He explores with great insight the wisdom of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and key theologians in the Christian tradition (Augustine, Aquinas, John of the Cross, and Rahner) on the problems and possibilities of loneliness. In essence, humanity’s core sin was the delusion of thinking that they could be God without God. This led to pride, selfishness, distrust, exploitation, jealousy, greediness, dishonesty, lack of openness, prejudice, unfair judgements, lack of reverence, and lack of humility. All of these behaviours cut the bonds that bind us together.

Only in what Rolheiser calls a radical union with God, others, and the physical creation will our longings be fully satisfied. This ecstatic community of togetherness is the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached and inaugurated for all. While we live in this current earthly realm, we get only glimpses of this reconciliation, seen through a glass darkly. God reveals enough, however, for us to trust the promised community that is both present and to come, but we live with partial and periodic experiences of that healing closeness. In the end, if we listen carefully to what the pain of loneliness is teaching us, we will discover the purpose for which God created us and find ways, as Soren Kierkegaard said, of turning “shrieks of pain to beautiful music.”

That music is the energy of a forgiven and reconciled community with God. In that gift, the loneliness that is part of life in this realm awakens us to a spiritual discipline that involves risk, vulnerability, free space, playfulness, and self-sacrifice as hallmarks of the divine love that wants to flow through us. If we can handle the dangers of loneliness with the confidence of faith in the loving intent of our Creator, then there is a security and serenity in solitude that enriches our lives immensely in their service to God’s purposes.

To get the full depth of Rolheiser’s understanding of the perils and potentials of loneliness, you really have to read the book. I hope this inadequate summary has piqued your interest enough to do just that.