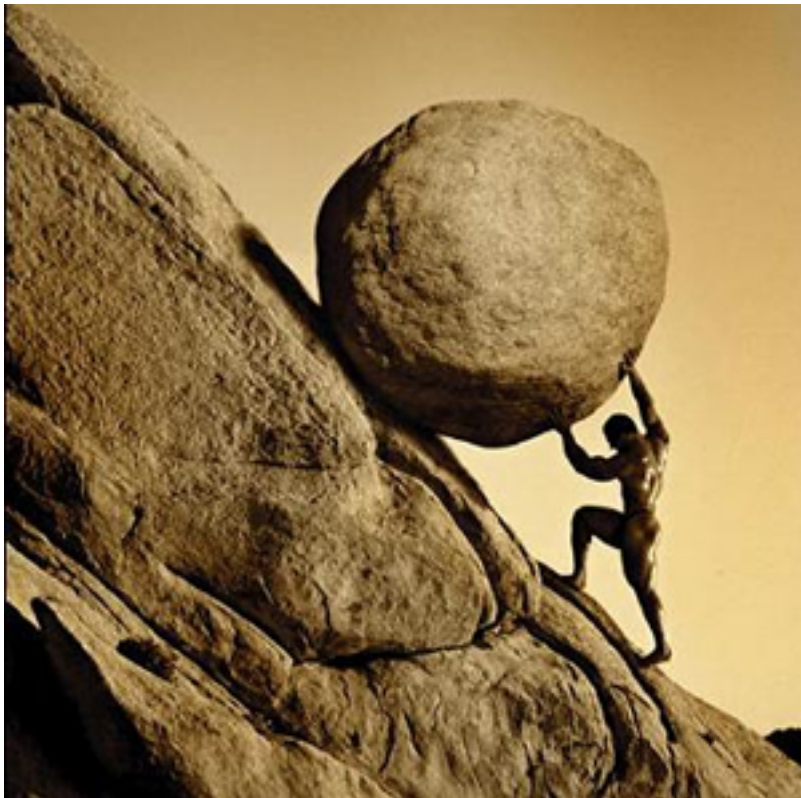


## The Three Levels of Christian Discipleship



Nikos Kazantzakis once suggested that there are three kinds of souls and three kinds of prayers:

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

When I look at life, I also see three great struggles, not unlike those so poetically named by Kazantzakis. And each of these has a corresponding level of Christian discipleship. What are those great struggles and those levels of discipleship? There are three major phases in our human and spiritual journey:

- **Essential discipleship - The struggle to get our lives together.**
- **Generative discipleship - The struggle to give our lives away**
- **Radical discipleship - The struggle to give our deaths away**

Essential discipleship and the struggle to get our lives together is our initial task in life. Beginning with our first breath, we struggle to find an identity and to find fulfillment and peace there. We are born in a hospital and soon taken home to where we have parents, a family, and a place that's ours. This period of our lives, childhood, is intended by God and nature to be a secure time. As a child, our major struggles have not yet begun. But that will change dramatically at puberty.

Simply put, puberty is designed by God and nature to drive us out of our homes in search of a home that we ourselves build. And it generally does its job well! It hits us with a tumult and violence that overthrows our childhood and sends us out, restless, sexually-driven, full of grandiose dreams, but confused and insecure, in search of a new home, one that we build for ourselves. This struggle, from being restlessly driven out of our first home to finding a place to call home again, is the journey of Essential discipleship.

Normally we do find our way home again. At a certain point, we land. We find ourselves "at home" again, namely, with a place to live that's our own, a job, a career, a vocation, a spouse, children, a mortgage, a series of responsibilities, and a certain status and identity. At that point, the fundamental struggle in our life changes, though it may take years for us to consciously realize and accept this. Our question then is no longer: "How do I get my life together?" Rather it becomes: 'How do I give my life away more deeply, more generously, and more meaningfully?' At that stage, we enter the second phase of discipleship.

Generative discipleship and the struggle to give our lives away is a stage most people reach sometime during their twenties or thirties, though some take longer to cross that threshold. Moreover, the crossover is never pure and complete, the struggle for self-identity and private fulfillment never completely goes away; but, at a certain point, we begin to live more for others than for ourselves. Generative discipleship begins then and, for most of us, this will constitute the longest period of our lives. During all those years, our task in life is clear: How do I give my life away more purely, more generously, more generatively?

But being the responsible adults who run the homes, schools, churches, and businesses of the world is not the final stage our lives. We still must die; the most daunting task of all. And so our default line must shift yet one more time: There comes a point in our lives, when our real 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?'

Radical discipleship and the struggle to give our deaths away is the final stage of life: As Christians, we believe that Jesus lived for us and that he died for us, that he gave us both his life and his death. But we often fail to distinguish that there are two clear and separate movements here: Jesus gave his life for us in one movement, and he gave his death for us in another. He gave his life for us through his activity, through his generative actions for us; and he gave his death through his passivity, through absorbing in love the helplessness, diminutions, humiliations, and loneliness of dying.

Like Jesus, we too are meant to give our lives away in generosity and selflessness, but we are also meant to leave this planet in such a way that our diminishment and death is our final, and perhaps greatest, gift to the world. Needless to say that's not easy. Walking in discipleship behind the master will require that we too will eventually sweat blood and feel "a stone's throw" from everybody. This struggle, to give our deaths away, as we once gave our lives away, constitutes Radical discipleship.

When we look at the demands of discipleship, we see that one size does not fit all!

Ron Rolheiser, OMI