

# All must pay for good, bad actions

Faith and instinct both give us a sense of what Hindus and Buddhists call the law of karma. Simply put, we have a gut feeling that our actions, good and bad, have consequences that come back to either bless or haunt us. But is this true? Do we really have to pay for everything we do?

Mary Jo Leddy, in her wonderful book on gratitude, claims that one of the great principles innate within reality itself is this: "The air you breathe into the universe is the air that it will breathe back, and if your energy is right it will renew itself even as you give it away."

In essence, that's the law of karma, a mystery expressed in different ways in all the great religions of the world.

Jesus, for instance, puts it this way: "The measure you measure out is the measure you will be given." The air you breathe out is the air you will re-inhale.

If that's true, and it is, it explains a lot of things (though not necessarily to our liking). Why, perennially, are we caught up in situations of pettiness, jealousy and non-forgiveness? Why are we inhaling so



Father Ron Rolheiser

## In Exile

much bitter air? Perhaps it has to do with the air we're breathing out. What are we breathing out?

We'd like, of course, to think that we're breathing out the air of gratitude, generosity, forgiveness, honesty, blessing, self-effacement, joy, delight. We'd also like to believe that we are breathing out the air of concern for the poor, the suffering, the unattractive, the bothersome. And, we'd like to believe, too, that we're big-hearted people, breathing out understanding and reconciliation.

Would it were so! Too often we're blind to what's really going on inside us and are unconsciously

breathing out the air of arrogance, self-interest, pettiness, jealousy, competition, fear, paranoia, dishonesty, interest in others only when it's convenient, and are emitting signals that others are a threat to us as we seek attention and popularity, and jostle with them for sexual, financial and professional position.

We can learn something from watching toddlers play. There's a disarming, brutal honesty in them. They simply rip what they want from each other's hands and try to shout louder than the rest to gain attention. We do the same thing, except in subtler and less honest ways. Beneath the surface of our everyday politeness and decorum, in ways we don't often have the courage to look at or acknowledge, we're still toddlers trying to snatch the toys from each other and trying to shout louder than others to get attention. The real air we're breathing out is fraught with self-interest, jealousy, competitiveness, pettiness, fear and less than full honesty. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways we're saying to each other:

"You're a rival — sexually, pro-

fessionally, and, in terms of popularity and attention." "Who do you think you are!" "I'm more important than you." "I'm brighter and more successful than you." "I'm better looking than you." "I've had more life experience than you." "I'm sophisticated beyond your naivete." "I'm the person here who's the most knowledgeable; everyone should be listening to me." "My sufferings are deeper and more important than yours." "I'm more interesting than others and my story is more important." "I hate you for your good looks and good luck, none of which you deserve." "I really don't like you, but I'll be nice to you until I find a way to free myself of this relationship that circumstance has dictated."

We would never admit that we feel these things but, too often, that's the air we're breathing out.

Is it any mystery, then, that our lives are full of competition, jealousy, bitterness, anger, accusation and false judgment? Is it a mystery why so often, beneath a polite surface, there is so much thinly disguised competition, jealousy and non-forgiveness around? We're breathing these things into the world; should we be surprised that we're re-inhaling them? The measure we're measuring out is the measure that we're receiving.

And Jesus takes this even further. He adds: "To those who have much, even more will be given; and from those who have little, even what they have will be taken away." That sounds so unfair, the innate cruelty of nature, the survival of the fittest applied to the Gospels, Jesus as Darwin. Isn't Jesus' message supposed to be about the survival of the weakest? It is; but a certain law of karma still applies:

To the big of heart, who breathe out what's large and honest and full of blessing, the world will return a hundredfold in kind, honesty and blessing that swells the heart even more. Conversely, to the miserly of heart and dishonest of spirit, the world will give back, too, in kind, pettiness and lies that shrink the heart still further.

That's the deep mystery at the center of the universe. The air we breathe out into the world is the air we will re-inhale.

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser is a theologian, teacher and award-winning author. He currently serves in Toronto and Rome as the general councilor for Canada for his religious order, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

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