

# Tortured Complexity

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*“I was born into this world with a tortured complexity. For long time I have puzzled over the causes of my psychological anguish.”* Ruth Burrows, the renowned Carmelite writer, begins her autobiography with those words and, like the famous words with which Saint Augustine opens his *Confessions*, they too set the tone for a very mature spiritual reflection.

I was browsing in a bookstore one day, glancing at titles and examining whatever looked interesting, when I read that line in Burrows’ book. Instantly, I was drawn to the book and a number of thoughts ran through me: This will be someone who understands life, who won’t be so simplistic and pious so as to require me to step outside of my own skin in order to be spiritual and religious! This will be someone who helps me accept the complexity of my own life and yet shows me how I might still will the one thing! I wasn’t disappointed. Burrows is an exceptional spiritual and religious writer.

I had already sensed the same motif in Henri Nouwen. He too was honest in admitting his own tortured experience and in naming the near-contradictory proclivities that pull us in different directions inside our own hearts.

Life isn’t simple: We want the right things, but we want the wrong things too. We are drawn towards generosity but drawn towards selfishness too. We like to be honest, but we find it easy to rationalize and not tell the truth. One part of us wants to be humble and not stand out, even as another part of us is prideful and wants to be recognized. We would like to pray but are drawn towards entertainment instead. We crave depth of soul but crave too the pleasure of sensuality. We want to give ourselves away in sacrifice, but we want too to experience the pleasures of life. A deep part of us wants to kneel in reverence even as another part of us is cynical and resistant. We crave both purity and promiscuity. We are drawn both towards the things of God and towards the things of earth. It is not easy, as Kierkegaard once said, to will the one thing.

We create difficulties for ourselves when we admit this, but even more difficulties when we don’t.

How do we live our spiritual and religious lives as if things were simple when, like Burrows, what we are experiencing is a tortured complexity? How do we make ourselves feel the right things when we are, in honesty, feeling a lot of other things? How do we make ourselves feel pious when so much inside of us wants to rise up in rebellion? How do we deny the fact that our sexuality frequently colors the purity of our relationships? How do we assert that we feel loving when what we are feeling is anger and resentment? How do we honestly say that

what we are doing for others is really other-centered when much of it is coming out of our own ambition? How do we deny that we are frequently jealous of others? How do we deny that we sometimes have near-blasphemous feelings of irreverence? How do we deny that so many of our actions arise out of our own stubborn and wounded pride? And how do we pretend that, right at the heart of where we should feel faith and prayer, we often feel boredom, disinterest, and an inner deadness?

But to feel this way does not, of itself, make us unspiritual or non-religious. Feelings of impiety, anger, ambition, greed, jealousy, sexual temptation, irreverence, and boredom only prove that we are human and emotionally healthy. The very essence of a good spirituality is that it must meet us precisely within this complexity. Serving God in this world does not require that we step outside of ourselves or that we deny our own experience. It only asks that we integrate our experience in a way so as to make it life-giving for others and for ourselves.

Thomas Aquinas once wrote that the adequate object of the intellect and will is all being. I first read that when I was a 19-year-old seminarian studying philosophy and I remember how liberating it was when I first understood what this meant. I was being introduced to myself, to my own tortured complexity. What, Thomas Aquinas asks, would it take to fully satisfy the longings inside us? His answer: Everything! So we need not be surprised that we are sometimes pathologically restless and out-of-sorts during our lifetime here.

And there's a sad irony in all this: So many people who want to be honest to their own experience distance themselves from religion precisely because they feel that religion makes things too simple, that it doesn't understand, and especially that it can't honor their experience. For many people, religion, all of it, is too simplistic to respect human experience because it doesn't take into account our tortured complexity. But the irony is that, ultimately, it is the only place where we are fully understood.