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EARTHLINES

By Diane Pendola

The Freedom of Our Calling

**This is the light that shines in the dark.
This is the solstice turning.
This is the birth of God in our midst.
This is the freedom of our calling**

*"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains,
but to live in a way that respects and enhances
the freedom of others." -Madiba*

The Freedom of Our Calling

I have begun re-reading Raimon Panikkar's final testament "The Rhythm of Being," his last great work published shortly after his death in 2010. I am reading it not as a student or an academic but as a friend. I am reminded of how close I felt to him after he died, and how he spoke to my heart at that time as a friend. A friend accompanies. A friend listens and speaks. A friend reveals his/her heart. A friend loves. A friend respects. Friendship is reciprocal. A friend recognizes the uniqueness of the other and finds a support for the uniqueness of oneself. Friends witness each other; risk together; explore together; encourage each other. Friends journey together into the unknown, the unexplored and the dark, providing a hand for each other, a presence, another breath.

I also recognize that Raimon Panikkar is my root teacher. Following his tap-root into the ground of our shared Being, I find living waters. I recognize how he helped me form my vision and empowered me to live into Wholeness and the Fullness of Life. I realize in reading his words, just how deeply he informed the choices I have made.

Could it perhaps be that the message of the sages was directed not toward bringing back a historical paradise, but toward helping us open a “third eye” by which we could see and live another dimension of reality? The experience of this third dimension, without alienating us from the world, allows us to live a full and realistic life in this world of ours. It liberates us from the despair of impotency and the anxiety of a barren existence. It does not prevent us from shedding tears, but as the spirituality of the bodhisattva and the Sermon on the Mount assure us, tears are not an obstacle for experiencing joy and peace. Furthermore, the experiential vision, liberating us from all fear, empowers us to work for the enhancement or perhaps transformation of the human condition. As the Jewish legend says, only a handful of saints sustain the world (Rhythm of Being, p.5)

It occurred to me, as I read these words, that it may be that Nelson Mandela was, and is, one of these saints. He showed us all the best of what human beings are capable. He revealed the transforming power of forgiveness. He provided a glimpse into the freedom of being on which our human and cosmic dignity is grounded. He embodied a life of freedom despite the external constraints of prison and apartheid. His third eye was open and thus, liberated from fear, he could work for the transformation of the human condition.

Of course, I believe Raimon was one of these saints as well. Meeting Raimon Panikkar when I was only 19 years old was a transformational blessing into which I am still living. His mix of embodied philosophy, theology, science and mysticism provided a foundation and an orientation *liberating me from the despair of impotency and the anxiety of a barren existence*. He empowered me. I of no particular greatness of intellect or artistic ability or intuitive prowess or entrepreneurial skill. He empowered me to enter freedom as my personal calling, to transcend the constraints of my own inner and outer prisons, and embody freedom so as to awaken its power and dynamism in others.

I doubt if I would have had the gumption to walk into a maximum security prison without the orientation towards life I gained from studying with him, praying with him and absorbing the light that radiated through his presence. The confidence I gained was in myself, in others and in the cosmic breadth and divine depth of the reality of which we are each integral. In that prison friendships have been forged from the metal of enclosing razor wire and cruel isolation into the gold of open hearts and loving accompaniment. My friends in prison are each an icon of the Whole. Together we are transmitting to others what has been given to us from the *saints that sustain the world*. We are shapers and co-creators of our world. We are icons of the entire reality and we can create all things new, if our hearts are pure, if our ego-centricity has been purified, if we are surrendered to the Whole within us and transparent to it.

Which brings me back to friendship. Jesus, too talked about friendship. As his life was nearing its end, he looked around at the people who had been his students and followers and called them his friends. He invited them into the freedom and responsibility

of being intimate with the divine depths as he was intimate. He invited them into the accompaniment of friendship, full of risk and vulnerability and the precariousness of the unknown and the possibilities of betrayal. Suffering and death were at the table of this invitation, as was forgiveness and transformational power. He did not make himself a god. He made himself a friend.

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I am tempted to end here. But I feel the need of a few last words. Jesus also said, *you will do what I have done and even greater things will you do*. Raimon Panikkar, Nelson Mandela, all the sages and unnamed saints that sustain the world (which, through us, are becoming more than a handful) call us not only into the transcendent peace of eternal presence but also into the intimate activity of transforming love. The transmission they have given to us, we will give to others. Their friendship abides and encourages us to exercise the freedom that is our personal calling.

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The Rhythm of Being by Raimon Panikkar, Orbis Books, 2010