

Rolheiser: The imperialism of the human soul

In his autobiography, Nikos Kazantzakis shares how in his youth he was driven by a restlessness that had him searching for something he could never quite define.

However, he made peace with his lack of peace because he accepted that, given the nature of the soul, he was supposed to feel that restlessness and that a healthy soul is a driven soul.

Commenting on this, he writes: "No force anywhere on earth is as imperialistic as the human soul. It occupies and is occupied in turn, but it always considers its empire too narrow. Suffocating, it desires to conquer the world in order to breathe freely."

We need to be given permission, I believe, to accept as God-given that imperialism inside our soul, even as we need always to be careful never to trivialize its power and meaning. However, that is a formula for tension.

How does one make peace with the imperialism of one's soul without denigrating the divine energy that is stoking that imperialism? For me, this has been a struggle.

I grew up in the heart of the Canadian prairies, with five hundred miles of open space in every direction. Geographically, that space let one's soul stretch out, but otherwise my world seemed too small for my soul to breathe.

I grew up inside a tight-knit community in an isolated rural area where the world was small enough so that everyone knew everyone else. That was wonderful because it made for a warm cocoon; but that cocoon (seemingly) separated me from the big world where, it seemed to my young mind, souls could breathe in spaces bigger than where I was breathing.

Moreover, growing up with an acute religious and moral sensitivity, I felt guilty about my restlessness, as if it were something abnormal that I needed to hide.

In that state, as an eighteen-year-old, I entered religious life.

Novitiates in those days were quite strict and secluded. We were eighteen of us, novices, sequestered in an old seminary building across a lake from a town and a highway. We could hear the sounds of traffic and see life on the other side of the lake, but we were not part of it.

As well, most everything inside our sequestered life focused on the spiritual

so that even our most earthy desires had to be associated with our hunger for God and for the bread of life. Not an easy task for anyone, especially a teenager.

Well, one day we were visited by a priest who gave my soul permission to breathe. He gathered us, the eighteen novices, into a classroom and began his conference with this question: *Are you feeling a little restless?* We nodded, rather surprised by the question. He went on:

Well, you should be feeling restless! You must be jumping out of your skin! All that life in you and all those fiery hormones stirring in your blood, and you're stuck here watching life happen across the lake! You must be going crazy sometimes! But ... that's good, that's what you should be feeling, it shows you're healthy. Stay with it. You can do this. It's good to feel that restlessness.

That day the wide-open prairie spaces I had lived my whole life in and the wide-open spaces in my soul befriended each other a little. And that friendship continued to grow as I did my studies and read authors who had befriended their souls.

Among others, these spoke to me:

- St. Augustine (*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*);
- Thomas Aquinas (*The adequate object of the human intellect and will is all Being*);
- Iris Murdoch (*The deepest of all human pains is the pain of the inadequacy of self-expression*);
- Karl Rahner (*In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we ultimately learn that here, in this life, there is no finished symphony*);
- Sidney Callahan (*We are made to ultimately sleep with the whole world, is it any wonder that we long for this along the way?*); and
- James Hillman (*Neither religion nor psychology really honors the human soul. Religion is forever trying to save the soul and psychology is always trying to fix the soul. The soul needs neither to be saved nor fixed; it is already eternal – it just needs to be listened to.*)

Perhaps today the real struggle is not so much to accept sacred permission to befriend the wild insatiability of the soul. The greater struggle today, I suspect, is not to trivialize the soul, not to make its infinite longings something less than what they are.

During the World War II, Jesuit theologians resisting the Nazi occupation in France published an underground newspaper. The first issue opened with this now-famous line: *France, take care not to lose your soul.* Fair warning.

The soul is imperialistic because it carries divine fire and so it struggles to breathe freely in the world. To feel and to honor that struggle is to be healthy.