

12.28.14 Previously Planned Sermon: "Do Humanists Have Souls – and Do They Want To?"

Presenter: Rev. David R. Weissbard

[soul]

Theological words are awkward in the modern world - at least for many of us. They are imprecise. They are used in so many ways, often conflicting ways, that they seem to get in the way more than they help. Soul is one of those problematic words. It is used in many ways by many people.

We postulate that the concept of the soul arose among our primitive ancestors on the basis of two observations. People in the tribe who had been alive but then showed no signs of life, looked the same, but something was missing. People also had the experience of traveling in their dreams while others testified that they had not moved. They deduced that there was something in the body that was separate from the body - something, the presence of which gave it life and the absence of which meant death and decay. Since it was possible to imagine that life-force separate from the body, some came to believe that the soul of the departed continued to live and to have influence over the lives of their families.

The dominant view within early Judaism was of the unity of body and soul. In post-Biblical times, some rabbis were influenced by the Platonic tradition which viewed the soul as pre-existing and then inhabiting a body. Neo-Platonism also affected early Christian teachers and became a part of Christian doctrine.

With the separation of body and soul into distinct elements, the soul became the part of the person that was eligible for eternal life. Among those peoples who believe in re-incarnation, the soul takes on the quality of being that part of us that returns to learn new lessons in each subsequent lifetime so that ultimately, when all is known, when faults have been redeemed, one can escape from the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth and finally know oneness with the eternal without any separation.

It is common, in our culture, people to experience themselves as fractured. We tend to have a distinct sense of our selves as separate from our bodies, of our reason as separate from our feelings, our conscience as separate from both of these, and separate from all the others is the imagination. It is not uncommon for people to experience confusion and conflict over who it is they really are.

In these materialistic times, it has been hard to get people to take the concept of soul very seriously. There was a very devoted behavioral psychologist, Laken Phillips, in the congregation I served in Virginia. Laken was unshakeable in his conviction that all there was to human beings was patterning that was the product of stimuli and responses. We were, in effect, machines. He had no room in his understanding of people for the unconscious, much less a "soul."

This sermon came about when I stumbled upon a book called "Handbook for the Soul." Published in 1995, it is an anthology of brief selections on nourishing the soul written for that publication by thirty contemporary guru's including Stephen Covey, Joan Borysenko, Ram Dass, Bernie Siegel, Marianne Williamson, Rabbi Harold Kushner, Robert Fulgum, Matthew Fox, and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

[a survey of views]

The authors who wrote about soul for that collection have no common definition - there are, in fact, conflicts. Some see the soul as separate from the body, some do not; some see the soul as separate from the ego, and some do not; some see the soul as connected to a God, and some do not.

Let me share with you some brief sections from diverse authors to give you a flavor of the book, then I will share my understanding of soul and illustrate it with stories of two people I have known.

The editors, Benjamin Shield and Richard Carlson, both of whom have PhD appended to their names, cite in their preface a paraphrase of W. Somerset Maugham: "*There are three rules for writing about the soul. Unfortunately, nobody knows what they are.*"

Rabbi Harold Kushner says:

I believe that each of us was put on this earth to fulfill his or her potential for humanity, and the soul is what makes a human being a human being and not simply another living creature on God's earth. The soul is not a physical entity, but instead refers to everything about us that is not physical - our values, memories, identity, sense of humor. Since the soul represents the parts of the human being that are not physical, it cannot get sick, it cannot die, it cannot disappear. In short, the soul is immortal.

Dr. Marion Woodman, a Jungian, suggests:

I think of my soul as the eternal part of me that lives in my body, day in and day out. In a way, my soul is the bridge between spirit and body and, as such, is a uniter of opposites, The unity that is created by soul is critical to my well-being. Without soul at center, I would either transcend into spirit or become mired in matter.

Joan Borysenko refers to the soul as, ". . . the substance of the universe, knowing itself and growing itself." She says:

To nourish the soul means to become kind and compassionate, wiser and more loving, often through the making of difficult choices that foster growth rather than safety. The nourishment and growth of the soul is the very reason for human life. When we nourish the soul, we nourish God, increasing the abundance of life we can see - our children, our society, - and the levels of the life that we don't see at all.

Stephen Levine, asserts that:

When people speak of nourishing the soul, they mean opening the heart to the subtle whisper in the mind, The soul, the life spark, is your essential nature. When the soul leaves, the body experiences death. We've got it backward. We believe we need the body to live. The truth is, the body needs us. The soul is the spark from the great fire. There is nothing in Jesus or Buddha that isn't in us.

Levine referred to the spark from the great fire. **Nathaniel Branden** also uses that metaphor when he asks, "How do we keep our fire alive?" He says:

When I think of nourishing the soul, I think of nurturing the ability to respond positively to life - that is, the ability to sustain passion for our interests, values, and projects. I believe the worst of all spiritual defeats is to lose enthusiasm for life's possibilities. . . . Even when our life is most difficult, it is important to remember that something within us is keeping us alive - the life force - that lifts us, energizes us, pulls us back sometimes from the abyss of despair.

Stephen Covey wrote that he saw the soul:

. . . as the primary essence of our true nature, our spirit self. When all the parts of the self, the intuitive system, the feeling system, the sense, the conscience system, the value system, the habit system are in synch, then the soul become the dominant force in your life. When this happens, you start to see the potential in other people.

One last quotation. **Phil Cousineau** asserts:

With the birth of science, many people stopped believing in immortality, which suggests that they stopped believing in the soul. So if someone says, I'm only here once, and when I die, that's all there is," it's highly unlikely this person is going to believe in the soul or take a discussion of the soul seriously.

[not so fast]

Cousineau is wrong. I don't believe in immortality, and I don't believe in re-incarnation, and I do not believe we are part of some great cosmic plan - that each of us was put on earth with a predetermined script or mission to fulfill. But, as I read those various perspectives on the soul, I found in almost every selection, portions with which I resonated. I believe that most of us, from time to time, have experiences which have a depth far different from the everyday: moments when we feel as if we are in harmony, rather than fractured, when we are doing something that feels like it makes a difference. To use the metaphor I cited twice, and appears additional times, there are times when we feel like we are really cooking - on fire - in touch with our best selves. These are the times when our consciences, our imaginations, our intellects, our feelings, and our bodies are synchronized, as Stephen Covey suggested. The whole becomes greater than just the sum of the parts.

Several years ago I heard the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, describe what he calls "Flow." According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is completely focused motivation. It is a single-minded immersion that represents perhaps the ultimate experience in harnessing the emotions in the service of performing and learning. In flow, the emotions are not just contained and channeled, but positive, energized, and aligned with the task at hand. The hallmark of flow is a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task.

This doesn't need to be a supernatural event. It's like when a nuclear reactor reaches critical mass, which is fully natural. Something big happens - something that was present is released. Endorphins flow.

Some of us experience this feeling from time to time; those to whom we refer as saints are people who seem to feel it most of the time. It is an experience that explodes upward and roots us downward at the same time, and the two are connected in the self.

Some of the gurus in the soul collection stress the individual nature of the soul, while those to whom I am drawn stress the relational aspects. Again, I'm not viewing this in a mystical context so much as in a practical one. Most people whom I would say appear to be soul-filled are people who are engaged on an ongoing basis in reaching out to others - who manifest the sense of living in a human family in which all are brothers and sisters. People who live in very small worlds, who cannot escape the bonds of aloneness, bear the least evidence of soul.

Those who seem to be in contact with their souls accept themselves and accept life, but they also accept the challenge of adding their part to making it a better world for others.

Jesus, Dr. King, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi - those are among the big ones, but there are many others, known and unknown.

It came to me that the subject I decided to address today is illuminated by the lives of two women who were memorialized in services I conducted in Rockford on two consecutive days of one week.

[Gertrude Mead]

Gertrude Mead, died at the age of 95. She had been an active member of the Rockford church for more than half a century. Throughout her life, as best as I could determine, Gertrude lived what many would call a "soul-filled" life. From her days as a teenager, she was always reaching out to people from a position of wholeness and concern.

One of the stories I shared in her memorial service was from a church member who remembered how, at the height of the Great Depression, Gertrude taught a group of girls at the YWCA how to operate marionettes. They became proficient enough to perform plays at various venues in the city. The member commented "Gert was always patient, kind, and a loving instructor. Believe me, she brightened some very dark depression days."

Gertrude and her husband served for 8 years as house parents at the farm operated by Rockford College. It was far from an easy life: they had a coal-fired furnace and a coal stove in the kitchen. Groups of girls from the college, which had an all-female student body at the time, would go to the farm for activities and overnights, and Gertrude served as mentor to many of them.

When I went to Rockford, I became quickly aware of Gertrude as one of those quiet pillars of the church who are not always "out front" but who are always positive and supportive and ready to do the work that needs to be done without ever asking, "Why me?" It was while she was in her 80's that Gertrude agreed to serve as a member of the church's Board of Trustees.

I remember particularly worrying with Gertrude one day when we found each other visiting our dear 94 year old friend Mabel Johnson, who was in a nursing home, recovering from a fall. We were concerned that she was not being well cared for. When I went back, Mabel was gone - Gertrude had taken her to her home to care for her. Mabel eventually returned to her own home for a time, but then she had to be moved to the county nursing home when she could no longer care for herself. It was a while before I discovered that Gertrude was going once a day at mealtime to feed Mabel, who was eating little and very slowly. This continued until Mabel's death.

I was reminded after the service about a year when we hardly saw Gertrude at all. Her son who lived near Chicago was dying of cancer and Gertrude moved in with him to care for him. Never was there a word of how unfair this was, or of self-pity. Gertrude was a rock!

Gertrude Mead was a woman with unbounded curiosity, courage, resourcefulness, and love for her family, her friends, her church, and her community. I had warned her family that the attendance at the memorial service might be low because when someone is 95, many of their friends have died. I should not have worried. Gertrude had never stopped making new friends and reaching out to people. I suggested at the service that she had been, for many of us, a model of what it meant to be truly humane. She is a superb example of what I mean when I think of someone who is soul-filled.

[Dorothy Spelman]

The next day, I conducted the funeral of another very talented woman, but one whose life was a contrast to Gertrude's. Don't worry - this is not a good person/ bad person contrast.

Dorothy was not a member of our congregation – her son was. Dorothy was 91. Interestingly, like Gertrude she had studied Home Economics - Dorothy at the University of Wisconsin. Dorothy had amazing energy and curiosity and determination. There was a big difference, however, in her relationship to her family and the world. It most likely stemmed back to two related events.

When Dorothy was 2, she swallowed a quantity of lye which almost killed her and did severely damage her esophagus. It was so scarred that she could not eat and her mother had to spoon feed her gruel and ground up food for six years. That made them very, very close. Then, when Dorothy was 14, her mother died suddenly - probably as the result of a botched abortion. From that time on, Dorothy had a very difficult time with relationships.

Dorothy dated a football star of the University of Wisconsin, but instead married Chuck Spelman. She often told Chuck and her family what a mistake marrying him had been. Chuck worshiped her and devoted his life to the virtually impossible task of satisfying her. He always tried to provide her with the best, but it was never good enough. She had four children, and when they looked back on their childhood it seemed to them that she had worked actively to keep them from bonding with each other - something they finally accomplished as adults.

The Spelmans were prosperous for a time, and had really big parties, but their friends evaporated as Chuck's income stayed stable while the cost of living rose. Dorothy tried to find satisfaction by collecting a lot of "things," but the things she bought couldn't satisfy her.

Dorothy was never able to consider seeking any help for the pain she felt in her life, and which she passed on to others.

It was fascinating, when I met with her children and grandchildren, to see how many happy memories they had of the wonderful things Dorothy had accomplished and done for them - memories which came almost as a shock to them. You see, they had forgotten the joys because of the pain which dominated her life and therefore theirs.

I would suggest that Dorothy's was a better than average life, all things considered. It had many positive dimensions. What it lacked was any kind of inner wholeness and peace. Her childhood experience had presented her with a burden that she was never able to overcome. Could many of us emerge from what happened to Dorothy without serious psychic scars?

[perspective]

I will venture that Gertrude's life was probably more complicated than we know. The decision to live on the College Farm was, I suspect, not simply a leap at an opportunity for her children to grow up in that environment. There was some hardship there. But Gertrude seems always to have had the kind of wholeness about her that allowed her to accept life in its totality without being thrown by it.

Is it all chance? I don't believe so. There are people who come through adversity in a far better state than some who come through privilege.

It has, in part, to do with perspective. It has to do with our attitude toward the world and toward ourselves. It has to do with our ability look beyond the past to the present, and on to the future. Lives that are focused only on the past are doomed because opportunities for change can pass by unnoticed.

The constant theme of those who advocate nourishing the soul is that time must be taken. There must be a commitment to spend time in contemplation, and then, the best ones say, time for action for others. That time in contemplation can be spent in nature, or listening to music, or creating or enjoying art, or just in thinking about life and our place in it.

The most important key is the realization – or belief – that we are not simply pawns who have no control over the world in which we live, and that we have the power to affect the

world in which our brothers and sisters live. The question is what we do with the opportunities we have.

I like the legend of the Lamed-vovniks, although I do not, as I said, believe that there are people who can make the rain come and go through prayer. I do believe that there are people who make a positive contributions to their communities without others noticing, and that there are far more than 36 of them. They are frequently not the recognized leaders, but common people who display respect and generosity and wholeness and commitment in their lives.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has, for many years, acknowledged this by encouraging the recognition of “Unsung Heroes and Heroines” in our congregations, who are nominated for recognition by our districts, and then nominated for recognition throughout the Association. One of the Unsung Heroines recognized by the UUA was my dear friend Doda Walker, who was a tireless supporter of the congregation in Bedford, the first one I served, and then, when she moved to Alabama, to a congregation there. Doda died this fall after a life of quiet service. She was truly a woman with soul. She touched and blessed many lives.

[exercising our “souls”]

Each of us has opportunities to exercise our souls, to reach out to the people around us, to make a difference in their lives. I believe that each of us is blessed by the touch of unsung heroes and heroines.

May we be sensitive to, and appreciative of, the ways in which they bless us, and may we be aware of, and responsive to, the many ways in which we have the opportunity to exercise our souls by blessing the lives of others with our touch. Are there some such soul-filled people sitting here this morning? Might it be that one is sitting in your seat? If not, maybe you will find an opportunity to become one later today – or tomorrow.

May it be so.

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