

## **Care of the Soul – July 9, 2023**

### **Reading**

#### **What Have I Done for My Soul?**

by Clara Miehm

What have I done for my soul today?  
 Have I given a helping hand?  
 Have I cheered my comrade on his way?  
 No—I did not understand  
 The wistful look in his eager eye.  
 I nodded at him and passed him by.

What have I done for my soul today?  
 When I drove thru the crowded square,  
 I saw a woman in ragged array,  
 Her face grim, and toilworn with care  
 She was my friend in the long ago;  
 I turned away—the world needn't know.

What have I done for my soul today?  
 When a lad asked a bit of advice,  
 I yelled at him in a surly way,  
 But now I am paying the price.  
 My errant soul has returned to ask,  
 Is kindness such a stupendous task?

What do I do for my soul each day?  
 Do I try to understand  
 The common need of the common clay,  
 That is shaped by the master hand?  
 Do I dwarf my soul by a heedless deed,  
 Or is loyal service and love my creed?

#### **Care of the Soul by Rev. Wayne B. Arnason**

Ten years ago, I was asked to present a paper to a new ministers' study group that was forming at Cedar Hill, a small conference center near Boston. The group had chosen a perennial topic for UU clergy study groups: "Science and Religion." My job was to review one of the books we'd read in common and offer some of my own thoughts on the chosen theme.

The book I was assigned was Eric Harth's *Windows on the Mind*, a book about the impact that new brain research was having on our understandings of the relationship between mind and body. It was a challenging book, and I did my best with it, but I felt that in my own comments concluding the paper, I wanted to explore a dimension of human experience that seemed to me

to be missing in Harth's analysis. So I wrote a few pages about the soul, the soul as a reality different from both mind and brain. I speculated about what the soul might consist of; I included a poetic quote from a spiritual storybook; I invited reflection and response from the assembled colleagues.

As I finished reading my paper, I looked up and immediately felt like a parent who had brought an unruly child to a sedate, adults-only cocktail party. Some of my colleagues responded to me with outright hostility, shocked that another UU minister would disrupt their intellectual festivities with something as irrational as a soul. Others avoided conversing with me entirely, deciding to keep their distance in case this unpredictable concept that I had brought into the room might accidentally spill something unpleasant on their clean and neat world views. There were some people who were willing to engage with this soul who had tagged along with me into the room, but it was as if all they could say about it was: "Cute little concept you have there."

The soul is a messy thing for Unitarian Universalists. We are burdened by whatever childhood definitions or images of soul we have had imposed upon us or picked up by osmosis. We are handicapped by a vacuum of contemporary reflection on the soul by any scholars, theologians, or scientists that we trust, precisely because the word itself carries so much baggage. We are intimidated by the possibility that we will be greeted by other Unitarian Universalists with the same chilly reception I received at Cedar Hill when I dared to suggest in my paper on Science and Religion that the soul might be an idea worth considering.

The burden of childhood definition we carry when it comes to the word "soul" is in the speculation about whether there is a material entity that is the essence of life. There is the true story of the wealthy man who recently offered a great reward to anyone who could scientifically prove the material existence of a soul that survived after death. The most promising study submitted for the prize was done by an enthusiastic researcher who had somehow arranged with a hospital to be able to monitor the before and after weights of dying patients in order to determine whether any mass had disappeared as the patients expired. This macabre experiment was apparently not considered worthy of the philanthropist's reward.

Some believers in the soul aren't interested in proving that a soul has a material existence. They may in fact believe that the soul is a non-material entity that does exist, and that leaves the body upon death and goes on to heaven or hell.

Some believers in the soul aren't sure about the heaven or hell part, and don't want to restrict the soul to humans or even to conscious beings. They see the soul as the life spark that comes from God and animates all of life— and of course, some people don't believe in the soul at all, except as a superstition or a metaphor from literature and poetry. Mary Oliver captures all the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the word "soul" in her poem "Some Questions You Might Ask."

Is the soul solid, like iron?

Or is it tender and breakable, like  
the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?  
Who has it, and who doesn't?  
I keep looking around me.  
The face of the moose is as sad as the face of Jesus.  
The swan opens her white wings slowly  
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness. One question leads to another.  
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
Like the eye of a hummingbird?  
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?  
Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
who loves her children?  
Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
What about the blue iris?  
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?  
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?

These images of the poet touch us and stir our sense of mystery. They remind us how little we know of the world that is around us. Perhaps it is all right that there are some things about which we know little but a name. The Sufis tell a tale about a man who had married a wife much younger than him. One day, his most faithful servant approached him and said: "Your new wife is acting suspiciously. She has brought a huge chest that once belonged to your grandmother into her room. It once contained only a few embroideries, but I believe there may well be much more inside it today than that. She has sent me away and forbidden me to look inside it."

The man went to his wife's room, and found her sitting beside the chest. "Will you show me what is in this?" he asked.

"Because of your servant's suspicions, or because you do not trust me?" she replied.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just open it without thinking about all these undertones?" her husband asked.

"I do not think that is possible."

"Give me the key," he said. She held it up. "Dismiss your servant and I will give it to you," she demanded.

The servant was dismissed, and the woman handed over the key to her husband. Then she, too, left the room, obviously troubled.

The old man thought about the chest for a long time. Then he called four gardeners from his estate. Together, they carried the chest, unopened, to a distant part of the grounds, and they buried it. The matter was never referred to again.

Perhaps our conversation about the soul should be like that. Why speculate about something that can't be proven, and even if, somehow, we could obtain the key to the box of knowledge that would tell us everything about the soul, maybe it would be better to just leave it buried and unopened.

I have felt that way sometimes in my speculations about the soul, but a book by a former Catholic monk and current psychotherapist named Thomas Moore has encouraged me to dig up my soul box once again and look inside. In his book *Care of the Soul* Moore begins to build his own definition of what this word "soul" should point toward.

"Soul is not a thing," says Moore, "but a quality or dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance. I do not use the word here as an object of religious belief or as something to do with immortality..."

So here we are talking about something very different from a metaphysical entity. Moore's book uses a psychotherapist's definition of the soul, inspired by Jungian psychology, mythology, and the arts. He goes on:

"Care of the soul begins with observance of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. We can't care for the soul unless we are familiar with its ways. Observance is a word from ritual and religion. It means to watch out for, but also to honor and keep, as in the observance of a holiday. The serv in observance originally referred to tending sheep. Observing the soul, we keep an eye on its sheep, on whatever is wandering and grazing—the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood."

Care of the soul then is an observance and honoring of the signposts, the scenery, the obstacles and companions of your inner journey. Sounds simple enough. So why use that troubling word, "soul?"

I think it's because we don't have a word in the English language that comes any closer to describing this meeting place, this crossroads where our separated, embodied lives encounter so much at once: the world around us, the unconscious archetypes which surround us, the history that we pull behind us, and the aspirations and values that we envision in front of us.

How do we bear grief? How indeed, had we not our souls to teach us to endure? There are things on earth that can't be seen, not with the naked eye, not with microscopes, nor binoculars, nor any lens. There are things within each creature that can never be explained. To wit: What is the soul? And where?

Yet the soul certainly does exist while creatures live: there is no life without soul, and when creatures die, it is their souls that die, or disappear, for not even a single cell of carcass disappears—yet something has been lost, or changed.

We are talking now about soul as something that teaches us to endure, that is part of the courage and wisdom that grows from life experience, from unearned and unexplainable suffering, something that we sense is either lost or changed when we are in the presence of death, and something that helps us to choose to live in the face of it.

Sometimes it is a crisis, a profound loss or a dramatic change in circumstances, that puts us squarely at that crossroads space where we recognize that soul is all we have.

These insights are echoed in Thomas Moore's understanding of what constitutes soul, but Moore adds one more way of seeing the soul, which I believe is actually the key we can use each and every day to open that mysterious box we have buried in our psychic back yard.

"Tradition teaches that soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination..." That is the fourth way of seeing the soul and the key to the box containing Tom Moore's understanding of it.

To say that imagination is the key to understanding your soul, however, is not to concede that the soul is less than real. If we are truly observant, and honoring, of the daily messages that our souls send us, and if we can greet those messages with imagination rather than literalism, we find that our soul becomes a true companion, easing our passage through this very real and very difficult world.

What are these daily messages of the soul? Ironically, many of them are symptoms—physical and emotional signals that we usually try to suppress or ignore or simply wait out until they go away. Insofar as psychotherapists and clergy work together in a common field, it is the common field of symptoms. People come to us with symptoms that they don't understand and that they want to go away. When we have the good sense to invite people, through acts of imagination, to befriend, rather than antagonize, their symptoms, they don't want to hear it. To suggest that a painful symptom, or a family tragedy, or a difficult emotional setback, might also be a vehicle for knowing the soul sounds too pat, too superficial. But it is just the opposite.

Some of my own interest in dreams and dream work has arisen from seeing them as messengers from that integrating, valuing, creative and enduring place that I call "soul." In his book, Tom Moore relates a powerful dream image from a client of his whose symptom was an eating disorder. She brought a dream to one of their conversations in which she discovered that her esophagus was made of plastic and wasn't long enough to reach her stomach.

That image of a plastic esophagus is a perfect one for our modern world.

"Our means of connecting to our inner work do not reach deep enough. The esophagus is an excellent image of one of the soul's chief functions:

to transfer material of the outside world into the interior. But in this dream it is made of an unnatural substance that stands for the superficiality of our age—plastic. And if this soul function is plastic, then we will not be fed well."

One of the most puzzling ideas that Carl Jung ever put forward in his writings was this one: he said, "The soul is for the most part outside the body." This sounds so extraordinary because all our usual thinking about the word soul associates it with the mind and locates it inside the body. To say that the soul is mostly outside the body is to connect the soul with our action in the world in an essential way. Jung echoes the shepherd's insight that husbandry, taking care of the things of the world, is in itself a connection into soul. Jung himself lived his belief in the connection between the outward and inward dimensions of the soul through the continuing work he did during his life on his Tower retreat. He began building a primitive stone tower as a dwelling for himself, and found that every four years he would be moved to make additions to it. As time went on, the daily acts associated with building, maintenance and living within this tower became a profound part of Jung's personal spirituality. He chiseled the names of his ancestors in the courtyard of his tower, and decorated the ceilings with motifs from his and his wife's coats of arms. He painted dream images on the walls and worked on carvings that became part of the decor. The outward work and the inner work that was manifested by the reading and writing he did inside the Tower were all one.

The soul feeds on the life around it. "To the soul, the ordinary is sacred, and the everyday is the primary source of religion." For this reason, any community that is concerned with soul must recognize the connection between soul, daily life, and spirituality. The soul needs a vivid spiritual life that keeps it connected to the outside world,

a spiritual life that does not smother the soul in rote that is trying to pass for meaningful ritual,

a spiritual life that offers an articulated world view and a sense of relatedness to the whole,

a spiritual life that balances a sense of transcendence with the immanence of traditions and values that have been part of a family for generations.

This is how soul and church are connected. Everybody has a soul, but not everyone knows how to touch and heal and nurture soul within their lives. Care of the soul can be encouraged by the recovery or the sustenance of a formal religious tradition. The practices of preparation for and observance of the signals of the soul are part of what a religious tradition is all about. The opportunities that church creates for conversation and mutual support in groups small and large, formal and informal, helping us develop the courage and the language to talk about soul, is part of what a religious tradition is all about.

It is the great gift and the great curse of many Unitarian Universalists that we are more comfortable with the intellectual path of religious understanding. Yet all of us know that our lives, our values, our sense of being at home in the world have been created not only by our intellectual encounter with the world, but by our experiences of joy at connectedness, of anger at injustices, and of wonder at overwhelming beauty, experiences that can all be wordless and ineffable. Soul is the place where all these experiences meet together with our ideas and our collective unconscious in order to prepare the spiritual feast that is life's greatest gift.

Perhaps the vernacular of African American speech has best captured the correct meaning of the word soul, for when you hear a black brother or sister praising music, or food, or a person who has got soul, you know there is an authenticity, a depth, and an exuberance which is being pointed out. We continue to strive in this church for some of that soulfulness to permeate our theology, our community, and our daily lives together. Back in 1910, writing to Freud, Carl Jung observed the churches of his day and commented: "What infinite rapture and wantonness lie dormant in our religion. We must bring to fruition its hymn of love." His observation is still true, and his challenge has yet to be taken up. May we rise to meet it.