

## *Growing Soul*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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*The consciousness of the individual is like a flame that burns through the night. It is not the same flame over time, yet neither is it another flame.* Buddhist tradition

*Every soul is the hostage of its own deeds.* The Quran

*It's not that we have a soul, we are a soul.* Amelia Barr

*A Soul is partly given, partly wrought.* Erica Jong

*The Soul should always stand ajar.* Emily Dickinson

*What is life, but a chance to grow a soul?* A. Powell Davies

### **WELCOME**

The elusive intangible something of soul: Inspiring, empowering, regenerating through sorrow, calm, and delight. Does it define us? Liberate us? Or draw us toward something beyond?

Does soul grow within us? Or is it the soil within which we ourselves might grow? Or is it the accumulation of all human longing and wisdom?

As we open ourselves this morning to possibilities and realities we cannot yet put into words, let's light the chalice and share our covenant: Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity and joined in a quest for truth, we work for peace and honor all creation.

**GATHERING SONG** #194 Faith is a Forest

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS** *Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda*, read by Jan Krouskop

**READING** "Circle of Friends" from Sum

**WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE** *Don't Miss This*

If you're not here now,  
You will not be there then.  
Take a breath, turn around.  
Don't miss this, don't miss this.

### **REFLECTIONS, Part 1**

Is soul something mysterious, intangible, out there? Or does it refer in some way to humans, or other material beings right here? — those in whom we recognize inherent worth and dignity?

If soul is a noun, are there a bunch of souls? Or is soul better understood in a collective sense, as one great soul of which we are all a part?

And whether one or many, are we talking about a static entity? Is there a perfect model of soulfulness, same as it ever was, as it ever shall be? Or does soul accumulate and adapt?

Or, rather than being an entity at all, is soul better understood as a characteristic — as in you've got soul like you've got depth or wisdom acquired through profound life experience?

Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of “The Oversoul” — not as something inside of us, but as that which shines through us. Our individual selves are just so many disguises for the Oversoul, which, “When it breathes through [our] intellect... is genius; when it breathes through [our] will... is virtue; when it flows through [our] affection... is love.”

Our individual selves are just so many disguises for the Oversoul which, “When it breathes through [our] intellect... is genius; when it breathes through [our] will... is virtue; when it flows through [our] affection... is love.” Don't miss this.

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One concept of “soul” is that it encompasses the *wholeness* of a person — something to strive for not only for our own betterment, but so that we can bring our *whole selves* into being parents and grandparents, neighbors, soulmates, and citizens of the world.

A story in this regard is told of a teacher who sees a distracted student tearing at the edges of a map of the world. Angry, she takes it and shreds the map, hands it back to the student and orders him to tape it back together. Within a few minutes the child is back, the task completed. Astounded, the teacher asks how he did it. He replies: “When I turned the pieces over, I found a picture of a person—well, a torn-up person. So I put the person back together, and when I looked at the other side, the world was whole again.” [Soozi Holbeche]

So that's one understanding of soul: wholeness that resonates beyond the self.

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How have you experienced soul? Can we think our way into its mystery? Can we observe it in others, or does it sneak up on us when we observe nonjudgmentally?

Do you find a connection to soul (-within... or soul-beyond) through ritual, meditation, or prayer? Through acts of generosity or forgiveness? Through effort, or restraint?

Is soul-making a collaborative or a solo activity?

Does it arise when we remove ourselves from the rush of life to contemplate the timeless and eternal truths? Or when we immerse ourselves in life without attempting to clothe our experience with layers of interpretation?

In Tao te Ching [#50], Taoist scripture teaches:

*The Master gives herself up  
to whatever the moment brings.  
She knows that she is going to die,  
and she has nothing left to hold onto:  
no illusions in her mind,  
no resistances in her body.  
She doesn't think about her actions;  
they flow from the core of her being.  
She holds nothing back from life;  
therefore she is ready for death,  
as one who is ready for sleep  
after a good day's work.*

She doesn't think about her actions; they flow from the core of her being.  
Don't miss this.

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Following a meditative interlude, now, let's share a time of silence. Not to think about soul or anything else, but simply to follow the motion of our breathing.

**WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE**                      *Follow the Motion*

When there is no road, I look for the path.  
When there's no path, I look for the footprint.  
When there's no track, not one bent blade of grass,  
I follow the motion of my breathing.

**MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)**

**REFLECTIONS, Part 2**

How do we respond to spiritual adversity? Loneliness, exhaustion, or the illusion of separation?

A couple of weeks ago here we talked about epiphany, wonder, and awe. Could it be that these kinds of experiences are like *collisions* with adversity — hot, sudden, unforeseen, varieties of soul?

And is soul, then, the cool version, the steady, open-ended version of awe... in which spiritual

adversity is not blasted into thousands of sparkling pieces, but companioned? Not embraced, exactly, but allowed to accompany us on our journey?

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Phil Cousineau, in *Handbook for the Soul*, writes:

*according to craftsmen of the Middle Ages...we have spiral patterns on our fingertips [because] the whorls there are the marks left by the soul entering or leaving the body. In this imaginative way of thinking, we infuse the people and things we touch in the world with soul by the care and attention of our touch.*

*Our soul emerges from this mysterious place inside us... and out through our fingertips, ensouling the wood we carve, the gardens we cultivate, the children and animals and lovers we touch. To me, this is a poetic way of imagining how we bring soul back into our personal lives – by paying attention to the very way we touch, as with the way we prepare food or the care we give our work or the manner in which we touch the earth.*

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Perhaps the question of whether soul is material or immaterial is beside the point. Here's a little verse by Eduardo Galeano that doesn't use the word "soul," but may tell us something about the body's inseparability from soul:

*The Church says: The body is a sin  
Science says: The body is a machine  
Advertising says: The body is a business  
The body says: I am a fiesta*

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I've been flitting back and forth today from observations of the soul as that which we are... and that which we do. This body as a container accumulating the wisdom of a lifetime... these whorls on our fingertips scattering the light like so many seeds to the wind.

Both images can remind us: we are not our own. Whether we are accumulating or scattering, we are inescapably connected to the spiraling web of all creation.

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Last week we celebrated the unfolding history of religious freedom and tolerance — acknowledging that we cannot force soul onto anyone. We've seen, on the contrary, that when we get too zealous in our quest for answers, or even the best path to the answers, we may push others away. Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, "When I was a Buddhist, it drove my parents and friends crazy, but when I am a Buddha, nobody is upset at all."

So growing soul, embodying wholeness, re-creating the world — none of this requires the attention of others.

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The living tradition we share draws from many sources, including direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life: direct experiences of pain and grace, joy and absurdity, moments of clarity, and devastating loss. Don't miss this.

Direct experience of life, whether we use it to systematically explain our beliefs or not, direct experience is central to growing a soul. More than theorizing about it, sermonizing about it, or critiquing others' views of it, soul is formed through our own experience of pain and grace, joy and absurdity, moments of clarity, and devastating loss.

Of course we also experience life indirectly, second-hand, deflected through the lens of others. It takes a strong constitution to take-in our immediate reality first-hand. Modern life draws us away from direct experience of birth and death, firsthand encounters with the grittiness of the natural world. So much of our experience is mediated through electronic devices.

So part of growing a soul today may simply involve making an effort to go outside of ourselves — to touch the earth and other living beings.

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Is the salvation of soul (for all eternity) our ultimate goal? Or, for the time being, is soul what enables us to enter — and to focus on — the time being?

In our story earlier of the Mindful Monkey & Happy Panda, we learned the simple lesson of dwelling in our present experience, without plotting forward the precise trajectory of this-leads-on-to-that. It would be arrogant and ultimately disappointing to imagine that all we do will proceed like so many dominoes in a row. But here's a paradox: in less than predictable ways, one thing does lead to another, one moment, one thought, one act does carry us through a process, a cycle of being and doing. For

We are here to do,

And through doing to learn;

And through learning to know;

And through knowing to experience wonder;

And through wonder to attain wisdom;

And through wisdom to find simplicity;

And through simplicity to give attention;

And through attention

To see what needs to be done.... [Ben Hei Hei in *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*]

May it be so for each of us. And for the great soul of which we are a part.

**SHARING OUR GIFTS**                      intro by Frank McDonald

**SENDING SONG**                              #317 *We are not our Own*

**BENEDICTION / CIRCLE 'ROUND**