

Care of the Soul

By

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A **soul**, **Aristotle** says, is “the actuality of a body that has life,” a physical body where life means the capacity for self-sustenance, growth, and reproduction. If one regards a living substance as a composite of matter and form, then the **soul** is the form of a natural—or, as **Aristotle** sometimes says an organic body.

According to the dictionary Tom Rapsas says [soul is] ... “a person’s moral or emotional nature, their sense of identity”—but in reality, we know it’s something that’s indefinable. Some ideas of the Soul envision it as being ephemeral, others understand the soul as being the essence of Who We Are! A soul can’t be seen or touched, it can only be perceived within, and even then, its presence is often fleeting. Rapsas says our soul is located in a place so deep inside us, it can often be forgotten as we go about our busy lives. Then... in a quiet moment... or when we are immersed in or exposed to certain activities... the soul surprises us and makes itself known. This moment can come to life by a book we are reading, by a piece of music we are listening to, or even by a small act of kindness that catches us off-guard. It can be awoken by something as simple as watering our houseplants or looking out the window on a winter day and seeing a woodpecker land on the branch of a slumbering tree.

Is living a soulful life at odds with our disposable society? It is the opposite of reality TV programs and manufactured pop music and gossipy discourse. The things that touch the soul are often deeper and have more meaning. This may involve retreating from the world as much as participating in it.

Thomas Moore says...”The world is changing so fast that some days I feel dizzy from it. Religion is changing in ways we could not have predicted years ago. The question is: Can or should we live without it? Or should we rethink what religion is all about? Religion is not only changing; in many ways it is disappearing, going the way of the bookstore, print newspapers, and landlines.” His book, **A Religion of One’s Own**, focuses on reimagining religion. Do we ever appreciate or even understand how deeply changes in science, technology or culture affect us? While science tries to answer all your questions and technology tries to make life more livable we still can get depressed or anxious. Purpose and meaning may be absent from your life. Whether you like it or not, you have a soul that complains when you neglect it. That soul needs religion.

When you meet a person with soul you will get the feeling that she has really lived – that she has a strong personality. Soul is the invisible, mysterious and softly radiant element that infuses your being and makes you human, gives you a sense of meaning, feeling, connections, and depth. Have you met someone that you could just sense had soul? You sensed a glow about them, could feel that they are alive and present? That they are a real person.?

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Without soul, we are dead, there is no value or real substance, no possibility for love and care; no heart and no real power or tenderness. Life without soul may be shallow and metallic, not really touching each other and not engaging with the world. One may feel a hollow emptiness and a vague sense of being lost.

Bringing soul to everything we do is important and to do so we need a vivid sense of the sacred, of religion. Unitarian Universalism offers avenues of soul searching through our 3rd Principle – *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregation* and our 7th Principle – *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are apart* – as well as our 1st Source – *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life* and our 6th Source – *Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature*. When we speak of Care of the Soul, we really are addressing Self-Care as it pertains to the world in which we must engage – care of soul, of mind, of body, and of the spirit. Self-care is really soul-care.

Our soul needs certain things – a sense of home, deep friendship and casual friendliness, a poetic and metaphorical appreciation for words and images, attention to night dreams, the fine arts, an intimate relationship with the natural world, acquaintance with animals, memory in the form of storytelling or keeping old buildings and objects that have meaning. We can do things to care for the soul such as reconciling our sexuality and spirituality, caring for children, finding work that we love, incorporating play and fun in everything we do, dealing effectively with loss and failure and inadequacies. All of this is soul-work but we must also address our Spirit.

The difference between soul and spirit is important to understand. Your Spirit directs your attention to the cosmos and the planets, to huge ideas and vast adventures, to prayer and meditation and other spiritual practices, to a worldview and philosophy of life. Your Spirit expands heart and mind, gives you vision and courage, and eventually leaves you with a strong sense of meaning and purpose.

Your Soul is more intimate, deep and concrete. You care for your soul by keeping up your house...learning how to cook...playing sports or games...being around children...getting to know and love the region where you live. Your Soul allows you to become attached to the world, which is kind of love. When the soul stirs, you feel things, both love and anger, and you have strong desires and even fears. You live life fully, instead of skirting it with intellectualism or excessive moralistic worries.

Our Spirit inspires, while our soul delves deep into the complexities of an issue. My Spirit likes to have a planning meeting; my soul likes to have a long and deep conversation. My Spirit sets goals while my soul plods along, going deeper all the way. My Spirit prefers detachment, while my soul sinks into its attachments to places, people and home.

UU Minister A. Powell Davies reminds us that the purpose of life is to grow a soul... and that this is the goal of Spiritual Growth. Care of self and care of soul begins with self-

compassion. A person must love herself or himself to make self-care a priority. It is compassion that motivates a person to care for themselves AND for another person.

Care of the soul is important work as it is at the heart of self-care and without it, we are diminished in many ways. M. Scott Peck wrote, "Life is difficult," and love is "The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." The care of the soul is also self-love, not as narcissism but as a means to greater empathy. From this point of view, care of the soul is a means of both deepening connections and caring for community.

In his book – Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life ...Moore states "To the soul, memory is more important than planning, art more compelling than reason, and love more fulfilling than understanding ...the most minute details and the most ordinary activities, carried out with mindfulness and art, have an effect far beyond their apparent insignificance."

Moore continues by saying, "Just as the mind digests ideas and produces intelligence, the soul feeds on life and digests it, creating wisdom and character out of experience." This wisdom and character is crucial for deepening connections and the spirituality that has been associated with the rise of interest in the soul.

It is important to recognize that the nature of the soul is difficult to map. If maps of the soul eliminate mystery, they also eliminate the soul. We need to prepare for vague definitions and hazy boundaries. Spirit and mystery are closely connected. Not everything that is mysterious is spiritual, while the genuinely spiritual always retains an element of mystery. For this reason, maps of the soul should not be expected to eliminate the mystery that is inevitably a part of the psychospiritual nature of persons. Understanding the soul and its care requires exploration of the inner world of persons.

"There is nothing neutral about the soul" Moore says. "It is the seat and the source of life. Either we respond to what the soul presents in its fantasies and desires, or we suffer from this neglect of ourselves. The power of the soul can hurl a person into ecstasy or into depression. It can be creative or destructive, gentle or aggressive. Power incubates within the soul and then makes its influential move into life as the expression of soul. If there is no soulfulness, then there is no true power, and if there is no power, then there can be no true soulfulness."

So how does our soul grow? Anaïs Nin said it best: "We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present."

The soul is a messy thing for Unitarian Universalists. We are burdened by whatever childhood definitions or images of soul that were imposed upon us during early religious education or that we learned through 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. 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.

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 life. Some don't believe in the soul at all, except as a superstition or a metaphor from literature and poetry. It is to poetry that we will often first turn in any meditation towards a common understanding of the soul. 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?

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.

"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." He did not use the word here as an object of religious belief or as something to do with immortality.

He is talking about something very different from a metaphysical entity and he uses a psychotherapist's definition of the soul, inspired by Jungian psychology, mythology, and the arts. He goes on to say:

"Care of our soul begins with observance of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. We can't care for our 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 the word, "soul?"

Soul is the word in the English language that describes a meeting place, a crossroads where we encounter so much at once: the world around us, the conscious and unconscious individuals that surround us, the history that we pull behind us, and the aspirations and values that we envision in front of us.

Our soul certainly does exist while we live: there is no life without soul, and when we die, our souls disappear – where they go is the big mystery!

Our soul teaches us to endure. It is part courage and part wisdom that grows from life experience, from unearned and unexplainable suffering. It is something we sense that 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's a crisis, a profound loss or a dramatic change in circumstance, that puts us squarely at a crossroads where soul is all we have. As the shepherd continues to live his life

on the farm after the loss of his wife, alone now with his sheep, he sums up what he has learned about soul. "I know three ways to see the soul," he thinks to himself, "though not with the eyes. Each way is a mode of loving, each a mode of loving vision. One way to see the soul is passion. And a second way is parenthood. And a third way is in husbandry." In the passion of his love for his wife, and in their role together as parents, and in the daily caring for all the outward things that sustain his sheep and his farm, this shepherd feels he understands all that he can know about soul. All of these insights are echoed in Moore's understanding of what constitutes soul, but Moore adds one more way of seeing the soul, which is a 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 – which is the fourth way of seeing the soul.

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. People experience 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 may not 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.

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 actions in the world in an essential way.

Your soul feeds on the life around it. Jung says, "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. This includes our very own UU community. The soul needs a vivid spiritual life that keeps us 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 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 the 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.

It is both a great gift and a great curse of many Unitarian Universalists to be more comfortable with the intellectual path of religious understanding versus a deep dive into soulful expression. 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 soulful. *On one of my many business trips I had the opportunity to visit the Grand Canyon. This was a solo journey and one morning I awoke very early and had the whole canyon to myself so to speak. I was standing at one of the overlooks on the South side of the canyon, completely alone as dawn broke. I was "filled" with the stillness... the colors, the grandeur, the expansive natural beauty of that moment fed my Soul. It is forever etched in my mind.* Soul is the place where all external experiences meet together with our ideas and our collective unconscious in order to prepare us for the internal spiritual feast that is one of life's greatest gifts.

How are you caring for your soul today?