

Homily – The Care of the Soul November 22, 2009

Story

“The Monk and the Samurai”: adapted by John Porcino, in the book *Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope*

There was once a samurai warrior who traveled to the distant home of an old monk. On arriving, he burst through the door and bellowed, “Monk, tell me! What is the difference between heaven and hell?” The startled monk sat still for a moment on the matted floor. Then he turned and looked up at the warrior. “You call yourself a samurai warrior,” he smirked. “Why, look at you. You’re nothing but a mere sliver of a man!” “What!” cried the samurai, as he reached for his sword. “Oho! said the monk. “I see you reach for your sword. I doubt you could cut off the head of a fly with that.” The samurai was so infuriated that he could not hold himself back. He pulled his sword from its sheath and lifted it above his head to strike off the head of the old monk. At this, the monk looked up into his seething eyes and said, “That, my son, is the gate to hell.” Realizing that the monk had risked his life to teach this lesson, the samurai slowly lowered his sword and put it back into the sheath. He bowed low to the monk in thanks for his teaching. “My friend,” said the monk, “that is the gate to heaven.”

Reading excerpted from *Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore,

The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is “loss of soul.” When soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them, one by one. But the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it. We have today too few specialists of the soul to advise us when we succumb to moods and emotional pain, or when, as a nation, we find ourselves confronting a host of threatening evils. But within our history we do have remarkable sources of insight from people who wrote explicitly about the nature and needs of the soul, and so we can look to the past for wisdom in restoring this wisdom about the soul.... It is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars—good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy... Tradition teaches that soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination.... Fulfilling work, rewarding relationships, personal power, and relief from symptoms are all gifts of the soul. They are particularly elusive in our time because we often don’t believe in the soul and therefore give it no place in our hierarchy of values. We have come to know soul only in its complaints—when it stirs, disturbed by neglect and abuse, and causes us to feel its pain. It is commonplace for writers to point out that we live in a time of deep division in which [the concept of] mind is separated from [the concept of body] and spirituality is at odds with materialism. How do we get out of this split? We can’t just “think” ourselves through it, because thinking itself is part of the problem. What we need is a way out of dualistic attitudes. We need a third possibility, and that third is soul.

Homily: “The Care of the Soul” adapted from Rev. Wayne B. Arnason

The soul is a messy thing for Unitarian Universalists. We are burdened by whatever childhood definitions or images of soul we been taught or have had imposed upon us. 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 if we dare to suggest that the soul might be an idea worth considering. The burden of the 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 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.

You have already heard an excerpt from the introduction to *Care of the Soul* in which Tom 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. Moore writes, “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?” We don’t have a word in the English language that comes any closer to describing this meeting place, this internal 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. There are things on earth that can’t be seen, not with the naked eye, not with microscopes, nor telescopes, 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 at that moment of death—yet something has been lost, or changed. Soul is 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 suffering. 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. Tom Moore adds

one more way of seeing the soul: "Tradition teaches that soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination...."

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 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. 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 action in the world in an essential way. Jung has the insight that husbandry, taking care of the things of the world, is in itself a connection into soul. I, personally, think of the soul as the foundation, the essential aspect of our interior, subjective, experience. Most of our interior experience—our particular thoughts, plans, worries, memories— are "accidents," in the philosophical meaning of that term. That is, they could all have been different from what they are without changing the essential ground of our subjective experience.

I could have been Chinese, or deaf-mute or illiterate or born fabulously wealthy and thus have almost all of the thoughts in my mind different from what they are now; yet I would still remain that same ground of subjective experience. This ground of what we are is that which senses, that which emotes, that which cares, that which strives to create, that which learns from experience, that which both generates and is attracted to the Good.

I, personally, believe that this ground of subjectivity is shared by all sentient creatures, in various degrees of development culminating on this planet in the human mind. The creation of the ground of subjectivity, I think, is a property of the universe. Just as the hard, rough limbs of trees grow soft leaves and colorful flowers, so does the matter of the universe grow consciousness. This caring, emoting, striving, learning, creative ground of consciousness let's, for the purpose of this homily, name *soul*. As one of its characteristics, the soul strives for full development. For its full capacity for caring; for emotional expression; for learning about its world and about itself; for creative expression of the Good. In this striving the soul can be helped or hindered. In the everyday world, the soul is often hindered from its full development. Too often, rather than one's life being about that development of the soul, life is about fitting into an all-consuming societal system. A system of over-work, of information overload, of pre-given and limiting roles to assume, of technical education, of acceptable concepts to believe. Instead of life's opening to the soul a canvass and a stage for expression, life puts the soul into a box and closes the lid.

Art, meditation, journaling, some forms of psychotherapy, and progressive religion are ways of resisting, ways of escaping, that box. 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 about 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 even ineffable.

Soul is the place where all these experiences meet together with our ideas and our unconscious in order to prepare the spiritual feast that is life's greatest gift. We continue to strive in the Unitarian Universalist 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 infinite 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 fully to be taken. May we rise to meet it. Amen.

Closing Words UU minister Rev. Barbara Pescan Because of those who came before, we are; In spite of their failings, we believe; because of, and in spite of, the horizons of their vision, we, too, dream. Let us go remembering to praise, to live in the moment, to love mightily, to bow to the mystery.