

“Oh My Soul”

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What happens after you die? This is the question we pondered during the first night of the New to UU class last March. Those who believe in reincarnation assembled in one corner of this room, those who believed nothing happens after you die went to another corner and those who believe we find union with God or the universe," went to another corner.

Of the twelve of us, two believed in reincarnation, three believed we returned to God, three believed nothing happened, and 4 found themselves in a catchall category of something else. One person from each corner shared a summary of their group's thoughts. The reincarnation group mentioned the wisdom of each life time being reborn and integrated in a new one, the return to god group spoke of two things, the returning of the energy to the life cycle, and the return of psychic energy to our collective consciousness, and the "nothing" group said well, nothing. Which corner do you find yourself in? If our small sample is at all representative, I am guessing we would distribute ourselves fairly evenly.

The word soul was not mentioned until a later conversation, when one person in the group asked, hesitantly, "Do I have a soul? I just don't know if I do." Her question was challenging because unlike other religions, we as Unitarian Universalist don't really have a theology of the soul mostly because we base so

much on first hand experience and it is sometimes hard to talk about things we cannot touch or quantify.

Ever since that night, I decided to deepen my understanding of the soul. Not for finding hope in life after death, but for finding hope in the fullness of living. To find the meaning of the soul that most major religions including Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam understand as existing in time and space.

My greatest teacher about the soul has been Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. She has discovered over her many years of practice caring for people with cancer that each person is born with an “unencumbered spot, free of expectation and regret, free of ambition and embarrassment, free of fear and worry, an umbilical spot of grace where each of us was first touched by God. It is this spot of grace she says that issues peace. Psychologists call this spot the Psyche, Theologians call it the soul, Jung calls it the Seat of the Unconscious, Hindu masters call it the Atman, Buddhists call it the Dharma, Rilke calls it the Inwardness, Sufis call it Qalb and Jesus calls it the Center of our Love.”

To know this spot of inwardness is to know who we are, not by surface markers of identity, not by where we work or what we eat or how we like to be addressed but by feeling our place in relation to the infinite, and by inhabiting it. Remen writes that this is a hard lifelong task (and this is a great sentence, listen) she says for the nature of becoming is a constant filming over of where we begin while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is not essential. Let me repeat that. The nature of becoming is a constant filming over of where we begin

while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is not essential. We each live in the midst of this on-going tension and eroding what is non essential is hard, a life long task, one I feel like I am always just beginning.

Dr. Remen says people are sometimes afraid to look within, afraid to find at depth, someone insignificant or even unworthy. Yet, she says this is rarely the case, the soul is our birthright, at depth everyone is beautiful. She says often it is the discovery of the spot of grace that heralds the greatest healing.

Dr. Remen's writing's helps me remember what I have learned about the soul from people with life threatening illnesses. As a chaplain, I remember one woman dying of cancer saying to me , "there is me and there is my body, whatever happens to my body does not affect me." And I remember the grandson who on seeing his grandfather's body asked "where did the energy go?"

Some of you know my dad died just over a year ago after suffering for years from Alzheimer's. I attended a few support groups over the years and picked up some literature that included testimony from patients and family members about their inward journey of spiritual healing.

Bill, whose wife had Alzeihmers wrote " If you believe in the concept of a soul, then you have to believe that the soul doesn't get Alzheimer's any more than it gets cancer. Maybe the soul has an awareness of the life around it that transcends the body, and the ability to communicate.

Beth, while caring for her husband, Pete, wrote, Alzheimer's has been the making of my soul. For one thing, it sent me back to church, where I began again to confront some of the crucial spiritual issues. I needed that larger context for our sorrows-and our blessings. I needed the stimulus of new friends and a community of faith. And I had been so lucky with most of my life: Pete's illness was far and away the most serious adversity I had encountered. I felt newly connected to others in pain. I was being initiated at last into truths and mysteries I had tried to avoid.

Doreen, a patient said "One of the things I like about this disease is that it keeps me so much in the present...it is as if mindfulness, which is normally a struggle, is now almost a piece of cake for me. Buddha said the cause of suffering is craving. And it is true that I find myself with fewer and fewer desires, I am more and more content most of the time. While I am not thrilled about the end result of this dementia, most of the time I can put those thoughts aside and just dwell in the present...and I see that as a gift of this disease.

Bill, Beth and Doreen call us to create an awareness of life, to cultivate the sacred, to know our spot of grace. To experience peace that sustains us in the face of adversity, and to know the precious and fleeting moments of being connected to the infinite.

To know these moments, we have to risk developing an inner life, to find the time to be silent, and listen. To go inward and face our fears of insignificance and to

lift up our sorrows and joys to the embrace of creation, to find at depth, the beauty.

Annie Dillard says in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

“At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world.

“Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourselves and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding or swaying, being rained on or raining, held flooding or ebbing, standing or spread. You feel the world’s word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused not everywhere the same. This is it, the hum is the silence.

Do you know this hum, the energy of connection? The hum of the boat, the sails, and your body vibrating with the pulse of the wind? The hum of the beach, the beating of your heart becoming one with the rhythm of the waves? The hum of gardens in bloom? Are these the moments you know your soul and feel at peace? Are these the moments you feel truly renewed? If not, then when?

Arthur Gordon in his story “The Turn of the Tide” speaks of a time in his life when he began to feel that everything was stale and flat. His enthusiasm waned; his writing efforts were fruitless. And the situation was growing worse day by day.

Finally he went to a medical doctor, observing nothing physically wrong, the doctor asked him if he would be able to follow his instructions for one day.

When Gordon replied that he could, the doctor told him to spend the following day in the place where he was happiest as a child. He could take food, but he was not to talk to anyone to read or write or listen to the radio. He then wrote out four prescriptions and told him to open one at nine, twelve, three and six o'clock.

"Are you serious?" Gordon asked. "You won't think I'm joking when you get my bill" was the reply.

So the next morning, Gordon went to the beach. As he opened the first prescription, he read, "Listen carefully." He thought the doctor was insane. How could he listen for three hours? But he had agreed to follow the doctor's orders, so he listened. He heard the usual sounds of the sea and the birds. After a while, he could hear the other sounds that weren't so apparent at first. As he listened, he began to think of lessons the sea had taught him as a child, patience, respect, and awareness of the interdependence of things. He began to listen to the sound-and the silence-and to feel a growing peace.

At noon, He opened the second slip of paper and read "Try reaching back" "Reaching back to what?" he wondered. Perhaps to childhood, perhaps to memories of happy times. He thought about his past, about the many little moments of joy. He tried to remember them with exactness. And in remembering, he found growing warmth inside.

At three o'clock, he opened the third piece of paper. Until now, the prescriptions had been easy to take. But this one was different; it said "Examine your desire."

At first he was defensive. He thought about what he wanted-success,

recognition, security and as he let these desires go he felt connected to all that gives his life meaning, the people he loves and had loved, and he felt the renewed desire to give back some of what he has received.

When six o'clock came, the final prescription didn't take long to fill. "Write your worries on the sand," it said. He knelt and wrote several words with a piece of broken shell; then he turned and walked away, He didn't look back, he knew the tide would come in.

Try this soon for a whole day, where will you go? What will you reach back for, whose love will call you forward, and what worries would you give to the outgoing tide? You may find as Gordon did, that when we commit our time and draw from the center of our lives, it spreads like an umbrella over everything else. It renews us. If we don't our life as Edith Wharton writes is like "a great house full of rooms, and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes."

Before I close, I want to learn from you, when you experience your soul-full moments? When do you feel the most connected, the most peaceful, the most refreshed? Let us teach each other....(SHARING)

In closing I offer an adapted version of the poem "A Few Words About Soul" by Wisława Szymborska

We have a soul at times.

No one's got it non-stop,

for keeps.

Day after day,
year after year
may pass without it.

Sometimes
it will settle for a while
only in childhood's fears and raptures.
Sometimes only in astonishment
that we are old.

For every thousand conversations
it participates in one,
if even that,
since it prefers silence.

Joy and sorrow
aren't two different feelings for it.
It attends us
only when the two are joined.

We can count on it
when we're sure of nothing
and curious about everything.

It won't say where it comes from
or when it's taking off again,
though it's clearly expecting such questions.

We need it
but apparently
it needs us
for some reason too.

Let us Sing I've Got Peace Like a River....#100

Closing Words

INVITE YOUR SOUL Transcendence-Perfection by Sri Chinmoy

Invite your soul to enter into your mind-jungle to clear it up.

Invite your soul to enter into your heart's insecurity to strengthen it.

Invite your soul to encourage you in all that you do and say.

Your soul will inspire you, fulfill you and immortalize you.