

Introduction

Today's sermon reflection was intended to be the introduction to a three-part series on the book *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism* edited by Frederic Muir, with the first installment being an overview of the impact of Ralph Waldo Emerson on our identity as a community of faith. When I read this week the Rev. Victoria Safford's message titled "The Soul of the Whole" in the June 2017 issue of the Church of the Larger Fellowship's *Quest* publication, I felt strongly that this was the reflection I wanted to share with you this day...and in the process pay homage to "Saint" Emerson on the slant...

~ Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

The Soul of the Whole

- by the Rev. Victoria Safford

<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/the-soul-of-the-whole/>

It seems to me we speak all the time and all at once of two kinds of spiritual integrity, two ways of being deeply, liberally, religious—**one looking inward, one looking outward**. And that presents a kind of paradox. Our work as 21st century Unitarian Universalists is to attend to both at once, never one without the other, because in fact they are not as separate as they seem; they're entirely intertwined. And whenever we forget this, things start quickly to unravel.

There is the part of you that is most uniquely you, deeper than mind, more durable even than your will—and holy, if you like that word, or sacred. It is the essence of identity, radiant with dignity and worth. Even when you feel unworthy and undignified, it's there, and has been since the moment of your birth, or your conception, **or that instant that the old church once called "quickenings."** We could argue all day long about when exactly it begins—but we won't.

No one knows whence or when it comes into the world, nor when or whither it leaves. If you've ever been present to the birth of a person or the dying of a person, you've maybe glimpsed at the bedside the difference between "**presence**" and "**no presence**." Without words, without anything that any of your five senses can latch onto, it's palpable and ineffable. Some people call this the soul.

A member of the congregation I serve described it this way: "Soul is more eternal than personality. It is the indwelling of the spirit, the true self, the real self."

John O'Donohue, who was a Catholic priest and a mystical poet, wrote:

There is a voice within you that no one, not even you, has ever heard—the music of your own spirit. It takes a long time to sift through the more superficial voices of your own gift in order to enter into the deep significance and tonality of your Otherness. When you speak from that deep, inner voice, you are really speaking from the unique tabernacle of your own presence.

So there is this practice, this awareness, of something deeply intimate and inviolate within each person, present from the start. If we have any doctrine to deliver to our children, then this is surely part of it: that they are originals, shining, powerful, lovely and beloved; that their worth and dignity and beauty need not be earned, and can't be, because these things are inherent and can never be denied, destroyed or desecrated—though sometimes you can feel as if they are. **How to return to the home of the soul** when you feel lost or lonesome or "beside yourself" is part of what we hope they're learning, what all of us are learning.

There is a sense of individual identity, personhood, sanctity, your own interiority. At the same time, there is this other understanding: a parallel idea, equally compelling, equally demanding, just as beautiful, and grounded not only in mysticism but in biology and physics—grounded in the ground, in the natural, physical world. **This is the awareness that whatever we are as human, living beings is deeply interfused, interwoven, interconnected and interdependent with everything else.**

That's true at a molecular level. It's true of the vapor of our breath, the material substance of the body, dust to dust. It's true as well in other ways—in the sense that whatever it is that is holy in me, separate and unique, touches somehow what is holy in you. It is not separate; it is the selfsame holiness, the spirit of life that blows in the wind and flows in water and in sap and glacial ice, and among and within the animals, fishes, birds, the grasses and the trees—the spirit of life.

I think this is what people mean when they say, as they often do, “I believe that when we die our energy dissipates back into the energy of everything.” This is pantheism, defined by one writer as the belief that the universe, with all its existing laws and properties, is an interconnected whole that we can rightly consider sacred...a holiness not confined to any one thing but immanent in everything. A pantheist walks literally in the mind and body of God.

A little different from pantheism is panentheism, the belief that God is both immanent and transcendent, that we all, and trees all, carry a piece of a larger, external, God within us. Either way—pantheist, panentheist—**it's a sense that the divinity in each touches the divinity in all.**

Poet Carl Sandburg said it simply:

There is only one horse of the earth and his name is All Horses.

There is only one bird in the air and [her] name is All Wings. There is only one fish in the sea and [its] name is All Fins.

There is only one man in the world and his name is All Men.

There is only one woman in the world and her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world and the child's name is All Children.

We think of the soul in two ways at once: as the spark within us that is uniquely our own, and also as the part of us that makes us part of everything. The paradox is that the deeper inside yourself you go—in prayer, in meditation, in mature self-understanding—the closer you come to a sense of belonging in all, and belonging to all. When my congregation says that the mission of our church is **“to grow our souls and serve the world,”** we're speaking of one continuous endeavor.

What does this look like in real life, in real time, in the practical, day-to-day, actual, grubby, busy, wonderful, terrible, tangible world where we live? **How does all this fluffy stuff show up?** Here is an example:

Not long ago a church member posted on Facebook a picture of a bathroom door, one of the restrooms in our church building, with the words, “Here is just one of the reasons why I love my church.” A picture of the bathroom door! Our restroom doors have been evolving here, thanks to our administrator, other staff, and many friends and members. The words and pictures on those doors speak an explicit theology, and we've been trying for some time to get it right. We are striving to express as plainly as we can the radical hospitality that is the very core of our religion, and like all theological treatises, the signage on our doors is a work in progress.

At the moment, there's a picture of a baby on each door, to show that there are diaper stations. There's a picture of a wheelchair on each door, to show each restroom is accessible. There's a single-stall restroom labeled "all gender," and on the other two (one with a small label "women" and one with a small label "men"), there's a sign that reads, "Gender diversity is welcomed here. All are welcome to use the restroom that best fits their identity." Gone at last are the iconic stick figures with the little skirt and little pants.

Our bathrooms are evolving. Our church email signatures are also shifting, so that staff can indicate the pronouns by which they wish to be addressed and in so doing, invite everyone to whom we write to do the same, to level the ground, the common ground, and name it as open, holy ground. He/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/their, xe/xim/xer—the English language presents challenges and creative invitations to self-determination. And the meticulous grammarian in me, the child of an English teacher, is creaking and groaning toward a new definition of "correct usage": not politically correct, but attuned to the music of right relationship. We're hoping that our church nametags, for everyone, will soon state pronoun preference right beneath our names, opening a necessary conversation and extending even wider welcome.

It is no symbolic gesture. Right now some states are passing laws to force transgender people and gender-queer people, some of them young children in their schools, to use bathrooms rigidly assigned by outdated misunderstandings of gender identity and fluidity, forcing people to conform to a binary idea, an ancient, flat-world duality, that can no longer hold us all. In fact, it never could. We can laugh a little at how on earth and who could possibly enforce this (you need to present a birth certificate to pee?) but pretty soon it's not really funny. People get hurt over this—physically hurt. It's not safe. People get beaten up over this. They get killed.

Each of us has a name...and a spirit, and a soul, a dignified personhood, which may not conform to what others think they see or what they may expect, but which shines brightly. It burns truly, just the same. We can't see it, but we believe in it. **As Unitarian Universalists, we are about creating space, open, gracious space, wherein it is safe for the soul to show up,** where each single one is honored and the soul of the whole is revered—the holiness within us and within which we all dwell.

We say, "I see you: stranger, friend, companion, living creature, fellow traveler on the same round earth. I cannot know—even if I know you well, even if I am your mother, your partner, your colleague in the next cubicle at work—I can't know what it's like to be you, and therefore presumptions and assumptions, whether born of convention or convenience or prejudice or ignorance or fear, need to all fall away." We say, "The divinity within me greets the divinity in you."

At least we try to say it. **That's where we begin.** And there are about as many ways to put your foot in it and say the wrong thing as there are people on the planet. I speak from the most glaring, clumsy experience. But we try, and we learn, and take risks, and make mistakes and scatter forgiveness like wildflower seeds, everywhere we go.

"Each of us has a name," says the poet, Zelda—many names, really, given by our parents, our relationships, our history and actions. Some names are bestowed on us by other people, names we might or might not claim as truly ours. Self-determination is a radical and sacred act, a human right. When a tiny child just on the edge of words speaks their own name for the first time it is revolutionary; they become a little freedom fighter.

When someone says, “I believe God knows my name,” I think they mean our truest, original self. I think of that exercise in consciousness-raising in which participants are asked to each name ten things that define them as a person. You make a list: I’m a father. A son. Life partner to this woman or this man. A widow. A musician. A Muslim, a Jew, a butcher, baker, candlestick maker—you’re listing the things that define you. Irish, Armenian, African, Dutch. Gay/straight. Tall/short. Blue-eyed/brown-eyed. Black/white. A survivor of abuse or cancer or war. A lover of orchids or baseball, online gaming or golf.

You list ten things, and then, in this exercise, you have to take two away, just cross them out. **(The exercise is about what exclusion feels like, what invisibility or prejudice feels like.)** So you cross out two parts of yourself, and then another two, then three—until at some point you can’t do it anymore, not only because there’s nothing left, but because it is a terrible betrayal. **All these relationships defining you are connected**, and the stories are connected, the legacies, losses, accomplishments, choices—these things are so finely intertwined with your original being that the weave can never be unwoven.

Your true name, the name God knows, is a singular composite, a gorgeous and unprecedented tapestry. “Who are you?” is a complicated question. Who are you? And whose? And why, and how, and who says so? Who gets to say? **The soul is a spark deep within**, inviolate, your own, and you stoke that fire with new vitality your whole life long, shining your bright flame, and warming your hands at the hearths of strangers and lovers and everyone else.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed Be and Amen.