

A Few Elements of an Evolving Soul

By Michael A. Schuler

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Let me begin with an admission: I am a little fuzzy on this whole notion of “soul,” as I suspect many of you are as well. Is it a “thing,” a spiritual organ, a ghost in the biological machine? Can soul exist independent of the physical body? Do birds and bats and baboons have it too? And, as Mary Oliver once wondered, “what about the grass?”

I tend not to think of the soul as a discreet entity, comprised of some sort of rarified material or subtle energy. I doubt that it is a distinct and separable piece of the human puzzle that can be lifted out or pinned down. I imagine soul to be something more dynamic than that—a disposition of the integrated personality; a healthy way of being in and responding to the world. I have trouble conceiving of soul as a supernatural appendage of some sort, the seat of religious consciousness and the source of our religious aspirations, as orthodox teaches.

But while I doubt that human beings have a soul per se, I believe we can, over time, develop a soulful quality. We can learn to see and relate to the world in ways that quell our anxiety, deepen our appreciation, induce greater joy and establish deeper and more loving connections. Our task this morning is to try to capture and characterize this agreeable state of being.

We all come into this world with unlimited potential for soulfulness, and with an initial disposition toward soulful living. One of its primary attributes is evident in innocent, untutored children. They manifest a precognitive openness, a receptivity, an air of anticipation and expectancy that we adults often envy. “All the windows of their hearts are open to the day,” is the way it’s stated in one of our hymns.

Alas, this radical openness rapidly diminishes as the capacity for critical judgment and thoughtfulness develops. A poem by A.R. Ammons captures rather poignantly the way in which soul ultimately is sacrificed in favor of more “heady” stuff—abstract concepts, ideas, and preconceptions. The trade-off is one that in later life this author came to regret:

When I was young the silk
Of my mind
Hard as a peony head
Unfurled and wind bloomed the parachute.

The air-head tugged me up,
Tore my roots loose and drove
High, so high.

I want to touch down now
And taste the ground
I want to take in my silk
And ask where I am
Before it is too late to know.

Ammons speaks of the opening, like the unfolding of a flower, of his youthful mind. Excited by the prospect of a rigorous intellectual life, he rises steadily higher into that rarified world only to discover in maturity that the tether connecting mind to matter had been severed. Now he feels like he is always hovering over the world, not connecting to it or even able to relate to it. Like a persistent breeze, his thought-processes constantly carry him away, and place him at considerable distance from the stuff of basic experience.

About ten years ago, I, too, felt a strong tug earthward and began to make a more determined effort to steady my mind, to establish a more immediate and holistic relationship with the living, breathing, pulsing universe. Like the poet’s, my desire was to re-inhabit a world that had become unfamiliar and from which I often felt frustratingly aloof. And so I began to study movement meditation and to use meditation techniques to pull my consciousness out of the clouds and back down into my own body and to the earth. As my practice developed, I was surprised to discover how much of interest had been escaping my attention!

When we engage in such practices we rediscover how much wider and more wonderful the world is than our thoughts about it. For all its marvelous inventiveness and flexibility, the human mind does manage to erect certain barriers to perception; over time it severely circumscribes what we can see and conceive. Anything we can do to open a bit wider the windows of the senses, to extend a bit further the range of our apprehension, to peel away the prejudices that prevent our hearts from connecting to this ever-changing circus of wonder and of woe—that is the beginning of soul-work.

The spiritual writer Anne Lamott and the British philosopher John Gray both insist that if there *is* some over-arching reason or purpose for our being alive, being a party to the steady unfolding of this amazing cosmic spectacle, it is simply to

take in as much of it as we can. The sole purpose of life is to learn to *see*, Gray remarks and Lamott follows up with the comment: “We are here to see as many blue chips of sky as we can bear.”

Sight in this instance is a metaphor for the unmediated and direct experience of being alive and of being intimately bound to other lives. Soul-seeing occurs outside of the conceptual realm, yet it does not renounce that realm. Thought, reasoning, and ideation remain important, but are not allowed to monopolize our time and attention. What’s “down below” (in the body) and “out there” (in the world) deserves just as much devotion as what’s “up here” (in the mind).

Soulfulness demands a partnership of equals—seeing and thinking working together but yielding each to the other as circumstance and the needs of the psyche dictate. Without sight, the world becomes increasingly unreal, indistinct, and devalued. Furthermore, when we don’t make a concerted effort to “see”, our inner life begins to atrophy; thinking becomes more and more claustrophobic. Without thoughtfulness, on the other hand, the strands of raw perception cannot be woven into a useful framework of insight and wisdom; we remain childlike and naïve. In the following passage by Roger Keyes, a highly respected Japanese artist by the name of Hokusai describes how “sight” and “thought” are brought into balance:

Hokusai says look carefully:

He says pay attention, notice.
He says keep looking, stay curious.
He says there is no end to seeing....
He says everything is alive—
Shells, buildings, people, fish
Mountains, trees. Wood is alive.
Water is alive.
Everything has its own life.
Everything lives inside us.
He says live with the world inside you.
It matters that you care.
It matters that you feel.
It matters that you notice.
It matters that life lives through you....
Look, feel, let life take you by the hand.
Let life live through you.

Take a moment now to “let life live through you”—to open the windows of your five senses, to feel the ebb and flow of the breath, to sense your heart beating in sympathy with other sentient beings. Through the soles of your shoes, experience your

vital connection with the living earth and ponder the relationship of mind with matter. Allow all the fluttering flights of fancy dancing behind your eyelids to dissipate so that your awareness becomes increasingly clear and uncluttered. It matters that you notice, so take a moment now to notice all that you’d overlooked before. Let your soulfulness unfold.

Gratitude

Alphonse Karr once said that “Some people are always grumbling because roses have thorns. I am thankful that thorns have roses.”

Few things, it is said, are more important to living soulfully than gratitude. Few things are as likely to provoke unhappiness and a host of other negative sentiments as ingratitude. For those who focus on the thorns, the beauty and fragrance of the rose, the sweetness of the raspberry, the stateliness of the Saguaro cactus fail to uplift and make but the slightest positive impression.

Few things are quite as inspiring as the soul who feels grateful for the privilege of being alive, even when difficulties arise and that soul has every reason to feel misused. Few things are as depressing as the person who regularly looks for evidence of his or her victimization; who insists that a worm lingers at the heart of every golden apple.

“Gratitude,” Anne Lamott writes, “and not understanding, is the secret to joy and equanimity.” Yet Lamott would also agree that modern culture encourages us to feel anything *but* thankful and appreciative for what life in the world’s most materially successful nation affords us. Each and every day each and every one of us is assaulted by an estimated 3,000 commercial messages designed to induce dissatisfaction, discontent, and a persistent longing for a life other than the one we now lead. Each and every day, As Kalle Lasn, author of the book *Culture Jam* observes, magazines, billboards, television, and radio, the internet, newspapers deliver 3,000 “micro-jolts” of advertising to our eyes and ears.

A great many of these messages by-pass the observing mind and don’t register consciously. But at some level we *do* assimilate and process them, and the cumulative effect cannot be underestimated. Studies have shown that children in particular are especially vulnerable to brainwashing from commercials. Many of today’s pre-schoolers have developed a sense of identity based on brands before they can barely read.

Despite the fact that many of us are already over-stimulated, over-saturated, in over our heads

financially, we remain unable to recognize, much less come to grips with this artificially induced craving and discontent. For every old appetite that is appeased, a new one quickly takes its place.

The Buddhist writer Stephanie Kaza says that we are presently in the midst of “a mass cultural experiment” whose long-term effects we can barely imagine. It is quite clear, however, that “the drive to consume has displaced the psychic space once filled by religion, family, and community,” and it now commands the lion’s share of our attention.

Some of the effects of this “experiment,” this revolution in values and priorities, are already evident. Surveys suggest that more Americans feel anxious, envious, resentful, and ungrateful than they do happy or satisfied. The number of people in America who feel entitled or deprived or victimized keeps growing. The percentage who experience a genuine sense of sufficiency and well being keeps shrinking. Despite all the comforts we Americans enjoy, gratitude is a much scarcer commodity than fear, just as grasping is more prevalent than giving.

Now more than ever we need, in our soul-work, to be intentional about cultivating gratitude for, as the Buddha cautioned, “it will not happen accidentally or spontaneously.” Much of our development as moral and spiritual beings depends on gratitude. Without it, an individual’s generous and compassionate proclivities are stymied. Without it, we will unhappily begrudge others their good fortune and resent the fact that fate has been kinder to them than to us.

How can we respond with real sympathy to others if we are mired in our own troubles, focused on our own discontent, held captive by our own unhappiness, convinced that lady luck has dealt us out? It is said that “misery loves company,” but if misery and tales of woe are all people have to share—all they have to give to each other—where does hope lie? Ultimately, it is gratitude that lifts, strengthens, and transforms the soul.

Let us make no mistake: to be grateful is not the same as being a Pollyanna. The grateful soul is hardly oblivious to or in denial of life’s vicissitudes and its occasional viciousness. It’s just that this is not where gratitude prefers to linger, much less to dwell. Grateful people are no more immune to sadness and suffering than anyone else, but they have gained the ability to “see” more and see farther than those who feel ill-used by life. The latter suffer from a spiritual myopia that prevents them from focusing on anything beyond their own personal displeasure.

Not long ago I ran across an interview with Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, the professional boxer who spent 20 years in prison on a controversial triple-murder conviction. Eventually released by a federal judge who found a “pattern of prejudice and racism” at the core of his previous trials, Carter moved to Canada, where he now serves as the Executive Director of the International Association in Defense of the Wrongly Convicted.

Surprisingly, Carter harbors no bitterness over his protracted, painful and often excruciatingly lonely term in prison. Because he fiercely resisted the prison culture and its discipline Carter spent many months in solitary. To the interviewer, he spoke both of “seeing” and of gratitude:

When you spend a great deal of time in darkness ... where everything blends into one, if you’re fortunate, you begin to see things more vividly than you’ve ever seen them before. It may take days, weeks, months, years, but you’ll begin to see things as they really are. You’ll begin to see yourself as you’ve never seen yourself before.... In a very real sense, going to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me. Without it, I would never have been able to find myself. I would’ve been a mean-looking ex-prizefighter talking through a screen of conditioning, anger and bitterness.... (and you know what) if people like Anwar Sadat, Malcomb X, and Nelson Mandela can come out of prison as better people, able to shape their country and the world, you can too.

Acceptance

When people can slough off their prejudices about how things are and their preconceived notions of what they are supposed to be and develop a more expansive perspective; when they can put away personal dyspepsia and replace it with a more positive outlook, they may be well on their way to a posture of “acceptance.” This is the way I am; these are the conditions under which I must function; and you know what? It’s all right.

At the end of the interview from which I quoted a moment ago, Rubin Carter is asked, “How would you like to be remembered?” He replied,

That Rubin Carter was *just enough*—just enough to overcome everything that was laid on him, just enough not to give up on himself, just enough to believe in himself

beyond anything else in the world, just enough to have the courage to stand up for his convictions....

Rubin Carter was and is an amazing man, but he doesn't need to be a hero. He is no longer driven to be anything spectacular or even special. At peace with himself, comfortable in his own skin, performing work that speaks to his heart, he can enjoy a truly honest relationship with reality. No need for pretense or self inflation, no ruthless and unquenchable ambition. Carter has "just enough" of what it takes to pursue a meaningful life and make a meaningful contribution.

It can take a long time to reach even partial acceptance of self and circumstances. I can attest to this from personal experience. For a long time, whenever I observed others doing work similar to mine, I found myself drawn to make comparisons. For years, I would come away from collegial meetings or church-related events feeling vaguely deflated. Other ministers do this work so much better than I, I silently and secretly lamented. Why can't I be as creative, as lucid, as spontaneously witty, as savvy about church budgets and organizational principles as they appear to be? Quite frankly, I have never felt wholly adequate to the tasks I've been required to perform and have always been more than a little envious of those with superior gifts and abilities.

But at this stage of life I am at last beginning to understand the toll that lack of self-acceptance exacts on one's soul. We cannot really appreciate who our colleagues are and what they have accomplished if we are always measuring ourselves against them. We cannot derive genuine satisfaction from our own work if we are always trying to perform it the way someone else would. We cannot get in touch with our own distinctive talents and hone our unique skills when we are determined to be imitative rather than original. We cannot respond appropriately to the conditions and challenges of our own community if we are operating from a set of imported assumptions and expectations. To be *at my best*, I simply *do my best* and that must be enough.

In her book *Radical Acceptance*, Tara Brach related a story about Ed Brown, a Zen teacher and the founder of a famous vegetarian restaurant in San Francisco called "Greens." By some strange coincidence, Trina and I ate there two weeks ago and enjoyed a truly marvelous feast. Ed Brown runs a unique and wonderful eatery, and yet it

would not *be* so special if Brown hadn't learned a number of years ago a lesson in acceptance.

As Tara Brach tells it, during Ed's early days as a cook he had a problem. No matter what recipes or variations in ingredients he tried, he couldn't get his biscuits to come out right. For years he remained frustrated about the quality of his baking until one day he realized that as a youngster he had unconsciously set for himself an unreachable standard: growing up Ed Brown had made and loved Pillsbury biscuits.

All along, then, he had been trying to replicate Pillsbury's canned biscuits. He had never tasted his own product without prejudice, without measuring them against this unacknowledged standard. But when he let go of that judgment, he finally recognized the distinctiveness of his own cooking. The biscuits he made were original; they were, as he put it, "sunny, earthy, real and much more present and vibrant ... than any childhood memory."

Occasions like this, Tara Brach tells us, can be stunning and liberating because they produce the realization that our life is fine just as it is, thank you. Only the insidious comparison to a uniformly prepared and handsomely packaged product made it seem insufficient.... No matter how messy and imperfect, this savoring, actually tasting of our own creations and relationships is much more complex, multifaceted, and satisfying. It is, in fact, so much more soulful.

Acceptance is not the same thing as acquiescence, a state of being wholly contented with and complacent about the way things are or who we are. It does not involve a refusal to change or to grow. One can, I believe, be open, grateful, and accepting but remain firmly "on the path." Letting go of our illusions, and of our yearning for a very different mind, or body and set of life circumstances doesn't mean that we cease to strive; it doesn't imply that there is nothing left for us to do or achieve. "Radical acceptance does not deny the endless creativity and possibility that exist in living," Tara Brach says.

As I said in the beginning, soul is not a thing but a growing recognition of life's grandness, its goodness, and its givenness. There is, of course, much more to the matter than that, but soulfulness becomes evasive when we try to scrutinize it too closely. For now, this is about as much sense as I can make of it. Take a moment now to consider how much sense "soul" makes to you.