

“Life Is Just a Chance to Grow a Soul”
August 28, 2005
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
The Rev. Judy Welles©

First Reading

Continuity,” by Karie Friedman

Among the ants and grasshoppers
of this world, the grasshoppers
--I mean, the eaters of chocolate cake,
the shoppers before the jeweler’s
display,
the sprawlers on sofas—
know this: each morning
a different person awakes
in the same bed.
Some of the cells are new,
others gone. It is his day.
Only the soul is the same as before,
holding traces of the past,
a vision of the future that might be,
though grasshoppers try
not to think too far ahead.
To them the future, like a heat mirage,
is drifting out beyond
the sweet grass destined to be hay.

The ants of the world
are not much better.
Early risers with broccoli on their breath
and diversified portfolios,
they need no prompting
to look toward the future.
Only the present is lost on them.
Each day a slightly different ant
plods out to add her
earnings to the common store
that no doubt will sustain
some future ant who looks like her.
But the soul is also there,
watching the meadow passing
as through a dusty window,

saving up images that in winter
will mean more, though faded,
than they do today.

As for the rest of us —
alternately lolling and mowing,
running up our credit, giving to the
poor,
admiring the glow of red wine
in our glasses, burying dead projects,
loving, leaving, we prefer
to call these contradictions balance,
our revisions growth. Maybe they are.
How does a soul evolve
except in feeling what we feel?
Given a dazzling summer or
a dusty drought, it is the soul
reminds us where we may be heading
as well as where we are.
The secret is, we get them both.

Someday my soul would like to wake
in a healthy body beside a person I love,
under a coverlet of red and blue,
while outside in a snowy clearing
birds flock around a feeder,
sharing our plenty. Should that day
come,
in all humility I will thank
not only a greater power
but day upon day of earlier selves,
grasshopper brothers, sister ants,
inching their way across unmapped
terrain and taking the fields
in zigzag, sometimes backward, flight.

Second Reading

Excerpt from *Care of the Soul*
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.

...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 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.

Sermon

Life is Just a Chance to Grow a Soul

There are so many ways of thinking about the soul. The poets, especially mystical poets such as Rumi and Kabir, write of the soul and its yearnings, its playfulness, its pain. Philosophers, both Eastern and Western, have considered for centuries the nature and origins of the soul, and the soul's relationship to the mind and the body. Psychologists such as Thomas Moore have observed the psychological pain that occurs in individuals when they ignore the yearnings of their souls. And of course, the soul and its eventual destination have been topics of consideration in all religions since the dawn of humankind.

When I said that I was going to be preaching about the soul this morning, a few people around here assumed that I would be talking about souls and the afterlife, whether or how the soul lives on after death. After all, this is a place for asking the important religious questions, and one of the great religious questions is the question of the afterlife, the disposition of the soul after death.

Well, as I have said before, I haven't made up my mind on that one yet. I am aware that there are countless — literally thousands and thousands of stories which give evidence of something about an individual that comes back to this earthly plane after death, of near-death experiences and death-bed visions that give evidence of some kind of consciousness that survives beyond death. People I know and respect have told me of their own experiences of being visited by the

dead, or of their own intuitions of the immortality of the soul after a personal near-death experience. I am strongly inclined to believe these stories; in fact, I want to believe them, because I find them comforting.

Yet at the same time, the tradition of intellectual honesty in which I have been forged impels me to acknowledge that we can't *know for sure* what happens after death until we die (and depending on what you believe about the *mind*, maybe we won't know then, either). And if we can't know for sure, then we can't proclaim something as *true* no matter how much we might want to. So on the question of souls and the afterlife, my current approach is this: believe what you want to believe, what you find comforting and plausible, because you might be right. And if believing what you want to believe about an afterlife helps you to lead a better life now, isn't that the point?

Sometimes in my more flip moments, when struggling (as I do and you do and we all do struggle) to give a simple explanation of our not-so-simple religion, I say that while other religions are deeply concerned about what happens after death, Unitarian Universalists are more concerned with what happens after birth.

And that is what I plan to talk about today — life, that part of it that takes place *between* birth and death, this worldly life in the land of material objects, where we ants and grasshoppers go about our business while saving up images, evolving our souls by feeling what we feel. During our lifetimes we grow and develop our souls. This is not a matter of growing a soul so that there will be something shiny and impressive to carry our identity with it into the afterworld. It's a matter of being as human, as authentic, as true to ourselves and as evolved as we can possibly be now, after birth. Because this is what it's about: life is just a chance to grow a soul.

This statement was originally expressed by A. Powell Davies, one of the most influential Unitarians of the twentieth century. In a recent biographical sermon about Davies, Mike McGee, the minister at our Unitarian Universalist church in Arlington, said "Perhaps Dr. Davies described his legacy best when he said, 'Life is just a chance to grow a soul.' [T]hat statement is at the heart of who he was as a person and what he taught. He certainly did not mean soul in the traditional sense, but more as the totality of who we are: our religious beliefs, our ethical principles, our deeds and acts of compassion and justice."¹

The soul as the totality of who we are: our religious beliefs, our ethical principles, our deeds and acts of compassion and justice — and, I would add, of love.

Oh, and by the way, what is the soul, anyway? Please remember that Thomas Moore said "Definition is an intellectual enterprise...; the soul prefers to imagine.." So I won't attempt to define, but will instead suggest an image. It comes from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

¹ McGee, the Rev. Michael, "A. Powell Davies — To Grow a Soul," Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia, October 14, 2001 (Legacy Sunday). Found on the Internet at http://www.uucava.org/sermons/Powell_Davies_101401.htm

...each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.* ²

I think of the soul as “that being indoors each one dwells,” that elemental, unique, delicious part of each person that expresses his or her absolute essence, the place where imagination and creativity lie. In terms of the question of soul survival after death, I *am* willing to go this far: what we remember of a person we loved — what made her or him distinctive, her quirks, his passions, the juice that lubricated their lives, whatever was unusual about them that makes the stuff of stories for decades — *that* part of the person does survive their death. *That* part of a person is “that being indoors each one dwells.”

Many cultures have used the image of light to describe the soul. The children's story this morning was one version (known in its adult form as the myth of the Gnostic redeemer). It says that we are souls made up of light which happen to inhabit material bodies, and if we forget that, we forget the truth of who we are. But we can be redeemed by one who comes to *remind* us of who we are, and what our essential nature is.

In the Bhagavad Gita there is a verse which says, “*As the sun lights up the world, the soul lights up the body. Those who possess the eye of wisdom, can distinguish the soul from the body—and therefore they can break free from the body.*”

In a Buddhist metaphor the consciousness of the individual is like a flame that burns through the night. It is not the same flame over time, yet neither is it another flame.³

In the *Kabala*, the teachings of Jewish mysticism, there is a myth that the universe was made entirely of light contained in two fragile vessels, which shattered because the universe was too unstable. As the vessels shattered, shards and sparks flew everywhere, and a tiny spark of the divine entered into each human being. The Jewish mystics teach that it is our task as humans to repair the world (*tikkun olam*) by bringing all those shards together again. And that inner spark of the divine that is inside each of us can be understood to be the light of our soul, which yearns to be reconnected with the greater light of God.

There is something in each of us that yearns for connection, though it's not limited to connection with the divine. This is love that I'm talking about. I believe that one of our most primal needs is the need to be loved; and as we age and mature, we begin to realize that we need not only to receive love, but to give it. The soul that only longs for love is a wizened and greedy soul indeed. But when we learn the satisfaction and pleasure that come from giving love, then our soul swells and we begin to understand our purpose in life, which is to give and receive love.

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”

³ Attributed to Marilyn Ferguson, author of *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, in an e-mail message from a colleague.

Of course this is not only about the pleasure that we receive from the act of giving and sharing love. The world is desperate for love, and as we mature and begin to understand better the ways of the world, our souls are drawn to meet the needs of the world through acts not only of love and compassion, but of courage, of defiance, of creativity and imagination.

Thomas Moore, author of the earlier piece that Don read, quotes the Roman writer Apuleius as saying “Everyone should know that you can’t live in any other way than by cultivating the soul.” Moore goes on to elaborate:

Cultivation [can mean] watching and participating as the seed of soul unfolds into the vast creation we call character or personality, with a history, a community, a language and a unique mythology. Cultivation of the soul implies a lifelong husbanding of raw materials. Farmers cultivate their fields, all of us cultivate our souls. The aim of soul work, therefore, is not adjustment to accepted norms or to an image of the statistically healthy individual. Rather, the goal is a richly elaborated life, connected to society and nature, woven into the culture of family, nation, and globe. The idea is not to be superficially adjusted, but to be profoundly connected in the heart to ancestors and to living brothers and sisters in all the many communities that claim our hearts.⁴

And it is precisely this profound connection in the heart that I refer to when I say that our purpose in life is to give and receive love. This is the work of our souls.

I mean this in the broadest possible sense, in all the manifestations of love that the human heart is capable of. I mean it in the sense of romantic, intimate, erotic love, where you feel carried and supported by the trust you feel in your lover; where the secrets between you are few and harmless; where you share the physical pleasures of your bodies as with no other person; where your interwoven histories have created a tapestry of memory and of hope; where you have the fullest possible experience of sharing and connecting.

I mean it also in the sense of parental love, where you would step in front of a rampaging tiger on behalf of your child; where the burdens of responsibility are buoyed by waves of hope; where you begin to understand the mighty struggle between pride and detachment that defines your task as a parent. Parental love is perhaps the fiercest and most unconditional kind of love there is.

The “many communities that claim our hearts,” as Moore said, also include the community of friendship, another type of love. With loving friends you experience loyalty, playfulness, generosity, trust and discovery. You encourage your friends, you challenge and stimulate them to move beyond obstacles, to learn new skills, to take up causes and give of themselves — and don’t you want your friends to do the same for you? Don’t you also want them

⁴ Moore, Thomas, *Care of the Soul, A guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, Harper Perennial, 1994, p. xvii

to comfort you when you are sad, to keep you company when you are sick, to confront you when you equivocate, to hold up the mirror of love for you when you need to see yourself in all your beauty and strength?

And then of course there is the wider community of acquaintances, neighbors, and strangers into which our lives are also woven. Here is the community where the demands for justice are probably the loudest, and where you are called upon to offer the most selfless love. Here is where you are invited to act with courage, to work with devotion, and to behave with compassion. It is in the wider community, where your efforts might be altogether anonymous, that you are challenged to develop the selflessness that is another marker of the grown-up soul.

Last November, an essay by Clarissa Pinkola Estes circulated on the Internet, in which she wrote of the need to remain hopeful in dark times. Here is one paragraph from this very moving essay by the author of *Women Who Run With the Wolves*:

One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times. The light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, causes proper matters to catch fire. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these — to be fierce and to show mercy toward others, both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity. Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. If you would help to calm the tumult, this is one of the strongest things you can do.

Another way to say that our purpose in life is to love is this: we exist for the purpose of serving. Just as we have been nurtured and cared for by others, we have a responsibility, a need and a desire to nurture and care for others. As we grow our souls, we become more aware that since all of us are connected in the interdependent web of existence, to help another is to enhance our own being.

I believe that service is the work of the soul. When we reach out to others, we are returning to what is most genuine and real in each of us. Though we are constantly being distracted from our true nature, pulled by greed, desire, and passivity, every act of love and service expands our souls and gives our life a trajectory towards goodness.

So far I have been talking about the way the soul interacts with the outside world, primarily with other people through the experience of love and service. But although the soul loves the particulars of life in the outside world in all its quirky details, there needs to be a well-developed internal life also in order for the soul to be healthy and to thrive. Moore writes,

It is obvious that the soul, seat of the deepest emotions, can benefit greatly from the gifts of a vivid spiritual life and can suffer when it is deprived of them. The soul, for example, needs an articulated world view, a carefully worked out scheme of values,

and a sense of relatedness to the whole. It needs a myth of immortality and an attitude toward death.⁵

For this reason, we need to be participants in religious communities, lest the allure of the material world cause us to forget the needs of our inner lives. Religion offers rituals and practices by which spiritual principles and understandings can be kept alive. When we gather in this religious community, we are reminded weekly of the principles that inform our faith — principles of wonder and awe, of respect, encouragement, care for the creation we call Earth. We come to be reminded of the ultimate mysteries of life and birth and death. But perhaps even more importantly, we come to church to be reminded of the sacredness of everyday life, to see the sacred dimension symbolically reflected in the events and activities of everyday life.

This is why so many of us instinctively value the Sharing of Joys and Sorrows as one of the most important elements of our worship life together. It's not a time for telling stories or sharing news; that can easily be done at coffee hour or in the newsletter. Rather it is a time to uncover and hold up to one another, with utmost care and reverence, the most sacred moments of our lives; a time to remind one another that both our joys and our sorrows are opportunities to experience the spirituality of everyday life. I implore you never to trivialize this sacred time in our service, but to treat it with respect and reverence.

Self-knowledge and self-acceptance are foundational to the soul. Our souls need this quality of inner honesty accompanied by self-forgiveness. Coming to accept and love ourselves despite our failings is also the work of the soul. Such work calls for self-reflection, taking things slowly, taking time to think and digest and eventually come to understanding. Time spent regularly in reflective prayer or writing in a journal can be helpful to you in doing the work of growing your soul.

These are some of the ways we can develop and grow our souls on the journey through life: by loving, by service, by reflecting on the sacred moments of our lives both inwardly and in the presence of others. I invite you to consider other ways that you can grow your souls, ways that are as unique to you and the needs of your own soul as the color of your eyes or the texture of your skin or the story of your life so far.

As we part from one another to take up the journey of our lives once again, my prayer for you is that you seek out the spirit's wholeness, looking inside your soul, touching and holding that ancient yearning in your search for truth.

Amen.

⁵ Moore, *op cit* pp. 203-4.