

Care of the Soul

In the middle of the Montgomery bus boycott, one of the protestors was asked how she felt walking to work each day, instead of taking the segregated city transport. "My feet are tired," she replied simple, "but my soul is rested."

"Soul" is a word sometimes used to describe the essence of a human being. It often refers to the element of personality that survives death. But for me it means something more down to earth. Soul is the meeting place of the sensuous and the sublime. Soul is what gives us our taste for justice, our appetite for beauty, our passion for order, our hunger for love. It's soul that inspires great works of art that unveil the pathos and comedy of our human condition. It's the soul that's lifted up in wonder when we stand underneath a night sky full of stars. When we speak of a soulful piece of music, we mean one that comes out of infinite depths of feeling. When we speak of the soul of a nation or people, we mean its capacity for heroism and visionary change. "The soul," said the psychologist Carl Jung, "is partly in eternity and partly in time." Soul is present whenever our lives intersect the dimension of the holy: in moments of intimacy, in lights of imagination, and in rituals that hallow that passing moments of our lives with enduring meaning.

Tending the sacred dimension of experience has traditionally been the province of churches and other religious communities. In Christianity, the village priest was responsible for the "care of souls" within his parish, though more recently that job description has been transferred to the therapist. So it was no surprise last month when Pope Francis disclosed that he had visited a psychoanalyst for a number of months during his early forties. The sessions helped him "clarify a few things," he told reporters. His analyst, who was both female and Jewish, freed him from some unspoken fears which had been dogging him, he said. If the Pope does it, no wonder so many others look to psychiatry and mental health professionals for guidance and support in moments of confusions or crisis. The language of the soul has been replaced by the vocabulary of the clinician. Yet if the Pontiff's testimony is true, the two are complementary rather than competing sources of wisdom.

Care of the Soul is the title of a book by one time monk and Jungian analyst Thomas Moore who suggests that we need to recover the art of cultivating the sacred. For the emotional ailments of our time--depression, anxiety, addiction and the rest--can best be understood as symptoms of an underlying spiritual malaise. That malady was described succinctly by Carl Jung eighty years ago in

his book *Modern Man in Search of Soul*, where he asserted that people of our era suffer from neurosis because they have “no love, but only sexuality; no faith, because they are afraid to grope in the dark; no hope, because they are disillusioned by the world and by life; and no understanding, because they fail to read the meaning of their own existence.” They suffer, in short, because they have lost touch with the vital sources of their own being. And nurturing those sources is less a matter of “getting your act together” or short term self-improvement than of daily and never ending attention to concerns of the spirit.

The story of one modern man’s “search for a soul” is told in Dan Wakefields’ moving autobiography titled *Returning*. He related being reared in a family that was like many others of the 1940’s and 50’s--maybe not so different than the one you experienced as a child: middle-class, Protestant and sexually repressed. As a youngster growing up in Indianapolis, he absorbed the parochial pieties of his surroundings. In the Sunday School of the First Presbyterian church, he learned to sing “What A Friend I Have In Jesus” and other hymns with words that were quietly reassuring for a boy whose family was filled with unexpressed anger and parental conflicts. But he abandoned his childhood beliefs as a college student at Columbia where he encountered the broader world of New York City, with its bracing mixture of dialects and races, and learned in his classroom lectures that psychoanalysis had revealed religion to be merely a juvenile form of wish fulfillment. “It seemed clear,” Wakefield recalled from his freshman course on Contemporary Civilization, “that psychiatry has replaced religion as the new, educated, scientific way of understanding the world, and though it didn’t have a God, its creator Sigmund Freud with his white beard looked enough like a representation of Him to seem a kind of stand-in figure for the deity in modern people’s imaginations (or at least in mine).” Loss of faith was only part of a much larger illumination for the young English major, who was soon establishing his credentials as a writer, reporter and correspondent. He covered the civil rights movement in the South for *The Nation*. His work on the Vietnam War won him a post as a contributing editor for *The Atlantic*. But even after publication of his first, best-selling book, an exploration of a young man’s coming of age in a large midwestern city, there was an inward aching that neither binge-drinking, nor marijuana, nor LSD, nor five years on an analyst’s couch seemed able to fill. By the time he reached mid-life, he was a successful television script writer living in Los Angeles and trapped in “a life [he says] I could only deal with sedated by wine, loud noise, moving images and wired to electronic games that further distracted my fragmented attention from a growing sense of blank, nameless pain in the pit of my very being.”

“One balmy spring morning in Hollywood, a month or so before my forty-eighth birthday, I woke up screaming,” Wakefield says. And that desperate cry marked a turning point. For the first time since he was a boy scout at Camp Chank-tun-un-gi, he began once again to exercise regularly and care for his body with a healthy diet. He left California and moved back East, to Boston, where he had spent time as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, and where he grew to love the parade of seasons so dear to New Englanders. Mostly importantly, he started once again to attend church--something he had not done since childhood.

It was King’s Chapel, a Unitarian church in the heart of downtown. He’d chosen it from the Yellow Pages because its liberal theology seemed less primitive than some of the more orthodox denominations. Still, his first ventures on Sunday mornings were furtive, as though in worshipping he were committing some intellectual sin that might tarnish him in the eyes of his Sunday *Times* reading neighbors.

To his astonishment, the congregants were thoughtful and reflective people, like himself. And as he became more involved in the life of the parish, he began to make additional discoveries. As a single person, without children, he found that a religious community could be a caring family. As a man who had hopscotched around the world, he learned the importance of connection to a place, a people and a history that could ground life and give it roots. As an individual who had been absorbed in his own private pain, he found the sense of fulfillment that comes from helping and serving others. As a man who had existed from deadline to deadline, he recovered an appreciation for the rhythms of the year, the holidays and holydays that transformed the passage of time from a digital readout to a cycle of celebrations. And as a man who had driven himself to high achievement, he discovered that life could be more than a fluctuating series of wins and losses. It could be a pilgrimage where success was measured by the quality of the journey itself.

“As fulfilling as it was for me to return to Boston and begin a new phase of life,” says Wakefield, “it did not make everything smooth. As the usual trials of life continued, I went to King’s Chapel not only for inspiration but for solace, a respite from the all too common afflictions of the human condition, from broken furnaces to broken hearts, from bad dreams to flu and taxes.” “Going to church, even belonging to it, did not solve life’s problems,” he concludes, “but it gave me a sense of living in a larger context, of being part of something greater than what I could see through the tunnel vision of my own person concerns.”

Providing that larger context is what churches, synagogues and religious communities like this one are all about. They offer no panaceas. Instead they offer opportunities for soul-searching, reflection and more intentional living. “Care of the soul,” affirms Thomas Moore, “is a continuous process that concerns itself not so much with ‘fixing’ a central flaw as with attending to the small details of everyday life, as well as to the major decisions and changes.” And although care of the soul can hardly be limited to Sunday morning, worship can be one of the ways we remind ourselves of the values that make life worth living throughout the week or through a lifetime.

There are many ways we care for the soul here. We care for it with poetry and myth. We care for it with music and song. We care for it in moments of prayer and silence where we commune with sorrows that are unspeakable and joys that go beyond words. Those who bring flowers tend to the soul’s need for freshness and beauty. In Sharing Circles, we care for the soul’s longing for companionship. We care for the soul in our support of the men’s shelter and through interfaith dialogue that widens our circle of acquaintance. We care for it through commitments made and promises and through rituals that affirm the sanctity of life: when children are blessed, lovers united, and the dead grieved and honored.

Like any human enterprise, the church occasionally does lose sight of its purpose. Religion often becomes trivialized. In another cartoon from the gospel according to Doonesbury, Michael is talking with Reverend Scott Sloan, the pastor of the Little Church of Walden. “So how’d your new church get started, Rev.?” Michael asks. “Aerobics,” comes the answer. “Aerobics?” “I needed something to attract folks from the community,” the cleric explains. “The focus group suggested an aerobics class. It worked, so I added Yoga and Bingo, and then a few 12-Step programs, and then we opened up a soup kitchen, which led to cooking lessons. Before I knew it, I had my own denomination.” “Wow,” marvels Michael, “so *that’s* how religion spreads.” This is not to say that yoga or cooking lessons are necessarily unrelated to care of the soul. But in all our gatherings, we need to hold sight of our real reason for being.

“Our culture is in need of theological reflection that does not advocate a particular tradition, but tends to the soul’s need for spiritual direction,” says Thomas Moore. And Unitarian Universalism might provide a shelter for the lost and searching souls who need a place of hospitality and sanctuary that will accept all travelers. We need, not a religion we have outgrown, but one we can grow into, to which we can return time and again. We might well heed the words of Carl Jung, who wrote in a letter to Sigmund Freud, “What infinite rapture and

wantonness lie dormant in our religion. We must bring to fruition its hymn of love.”