



The Soul of the Whole

BY VICTORIA SAFFORD, SENIOR MINISTER, WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH, MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA

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 inter-fused, 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

Quest

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Stop acting so small.
You are the Universe
in ecstatic motion.

—Rumi

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT SPIRIT/SOUL

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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.

**Each of us has a name...
and a spirit, and a soul,
a dignified personhood...
which shines brightly.**

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, accomplish-

ments, 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?

Soul

BY MARK BELLETINI,
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Not that transparent
self tucked under my skin
one day to be set free by my death
that it might fly.
Not the Oversoul of Emerson, his
New England Atman,
unless you can oil it up first, so that it
slips out of your hand
as soon as you try to cut and paste it
to a dictionary page
in the same part of the library as the-
ology,
but far from where they gather the
poems.
When Bill T. Jones or Alvin Ailey
leap on the dance stage,
you might catch a glimpse of it out of
the corner
of the corner of your eye, but you
will never be sure.
You’ll note that your breathing
changed pace,
and that your eyes are wet, but those
are clues, not soul.
It’s not a thing to be carried, but
sometimes
you might feel that you are being
carried
high above the snapping dragons at
your feet.
You can’t say it occupies space, but
without
the space between you and me, space
to be crossed,
best not to talk about it.
Steady love, and tested friendship are
the chalices

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. ■

that appear to hold it like fine wine,
but if you drink it, it’s that rare
vintage
that is never drunk to the dregs.
What is between you and me might
be called soul,
but when we are gone, and different
faces anchor
the between-ness, it will still be there
when are not.
When music bears it along into your
bones,
you will feel that you can rush up and
embrace it,
but soon you’ll smile remembering it
is not an it.
More of a becoming, more like fire
that can both illumine and scorch,
dance and consume.
The last line of a Szymborska poem
usually
uncovers the soul which was right
there all along.
Soul is the spirit of it all, not the all.
Life, not desire.
Passion, not frenzy or desperation.
Not juice in the limbic system,
but the relationship between that and,
say, Alpha Centauri,
and between Alpha Centauri and
thatness.
Or between your eye and a homeless
woman
bobbing against a wall in the snow,
or between your skin and the skin of
someone
shot dead because of the color of
theirs.
You know, soul.
Here it is, right now.
Here it is, right now. ■



The Movement of the Spirit

BY JONALU JOHNSTONE,
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Have you ever had a spiritual experience, a sense of movement of the spirit? A flash in time when your appreciation for the world was so complete, so perfect, that you were transfixed and transformed? A moment in which you had found a place that you treasure in your heart? But then, when you described it to others, the words were never full enough, never sweet enough, never sharp enough, never enough to convey the *wow* of the moment, the senses heightened, the life in you fully awakened, the twinkling of connection, of perfection, of peace, of unity.

We can't make those transcendent moments come to us. When they do come, we can't make them stay. We can't even be sure what they mean, at least not until we take time for reflection and discernment. We can only bask in them when they arrive, consider them when they have gone, and hope that we learn from them whatever we need to.

I recognize that spirit and "spiritual" are loaded terms for some of us. On the other hand, I can think of no better word for such experience, and I do think it's relevant to how we live our lives.

First, what is spirit? We speak of it as if we know what it is, yet the abundance of definitions confuses as much as it clarifies. Spirit comes up in many contexts. School spirit has a lot more to do with football than with God, while community spirit produces strong volunteer effort. The French gave us *esprit de corps* to animate military units and work teams. We refer to ghosts as spirits, and speak of someone

writing "in the spirit" of someone else when they have been deeply influenced by them. We refer to someone's good mood as "in high spirits" and a sourpuss as "in poor spirits." And speaking of spirits, there's that other kind—Cheers!

In German the word *geist* is similar to *spirit*, but creates different shades of meaning depending on the context and what syllable is added to it—a system that seems to offer more precision. But we may have more confusion in English. And, even with the overlay of religion on *spirit*, we can't contain it in a religious envelope, despite the heavily religious—or spiritual, if you will—connotations of the word. Is it surprising that the word *spirit* is as hard to pin down as spirit itself is?

Spirit, like wind, is elusive and ever moving.

In many Christian churches today, this month brings the celebration of Pentecost, a holiday we don't often recognize as UUs. Do you know the Pentecost story? The Jews had gathered in Jerusalem some fifty days after Passover for the holiday they called Pentecost, a commemoration of the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. The followers of Jesus—not yet called Christians—felt a mighty wind and tongues of flame descended on them and they spoke and somehow, all who were present, from all the corners of the Diaspora, heard the words in their own language.

"They must be drunk," said the skeptics. Really, that's in the text. I've often thought those were the proto-Unitarians, searching for a rational explanation. To which the Apostle Peter replied, "It's only nine in the morning! They're not drunk."

One of the fascinating things about this story is that the spirit comes not to a single person bringing tranquility, but

to a large group of people bringing energy. And that highlights for me some of the questions that cluster around spirit.

Is the spiritual a private, internal experience, or a shared, communal one? Those seem radically different to me. And is it about serenity and peace, or energy and action? Again, two very dissimilar impulses.

While the dictionary equates soul and spirit, some writers make a distinction between them. Bill Plotkin, a depth psychologist, eco-therapist and wilderness guide from Colorado writes in his book, *Soulcraft: Crossing Into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*, that the soul "holds our individuality together and gives us our identity," while the spirit is "the single, great, and eternal mystery that permeates and animates everything in the universe and yet transcends all." In other words, soul is particular and individual while spirit is what links us all together. Spirit is in us, but at the same time is out there. Soul is always internal.

Reading his descriptions reminded me of the distinctions the Hindus make between atman and Brahman. While atman (individual soul) and Brahman (universal spirit) are distinct and separate, they are also the same. Famously, Hindus say, "Atman is Brahman."

Here's where the distinctions between spirit and soul, or atman and Brahman, take me. When we realize our connection with that which is larger than ourselves, we touch spirit. When we go deep into better understanding of our unique selves, we engage soul. Sometimes during that deep engagement of soul, we realize a connection with our particular niche in the larger world, so we also slip up against spirit.

For instance, one of my great spirit moments was standing out on a cliff in a wilderness area, wind pushing against me, shaping the trees around me whose branches seemed to grow into the void created by the sudden

drop-off of land. Before me, above me and even below me was the expanse of sky. My senses heightened, I felt exhilarated, but it was as if I felt not only my feelings, but also the feelings of the trees and the wind and the sky. I was profoundly connected with my space in the universe, aware not only of myself, but of my unity with all.

So, is spirit a private internal experience or a shared, communal one? My theory is that spirit is an experience of connection with what is greater, so if that private internal experience leads to connection with what is greater, then spirit is present.

In other situations, the experience is more overtly communal. The experience at the first Pentecost, whatever it was, was shared by thousands of souls. So, too, was the Azusa Street Revival in the spring of 1906, in Los Angeles, during which people were speaking in tongues and smitten by the spirit. The founding of the Pentecostal tradition emerges from that event.

We UUs might better relate to being caught up in the spirit as we perform or hear music or get carried away at a political rally or march. Swept up in something bigger than themselves, people feel a common humanity that cements them and inspires them. The spirit moves, and everyone feels unity and gets carried along as if by a great wind. Our language expresses it this way: we lose ourselves. UU minister Shay MacKay called it “the experience of overcoming physical and cultural differences in pursuit of connection at a more universal, divine level.”

It’s fun to be part of something like that. What’s more, that kind of spirit can accomplish great things. It gives people courage to march for human rights even when faced by tear gas and tanks. It rallies rescue responses in disasters. It inspires sacrifices of time and energy and money to build something bigger than oneself, so that the group lives on as family or tribe or

nation or church. It also leads people into wars where they sacrifice themselves completely.

Something in this suggests to me an evolutionary characteristic that somehow contributed to our human survival. Self-sacrifice can be required for the survival of a species, and individuals do not surrender themselves readily. Something, though, encourages us—literally, gives us courage—and that is spirit.

The longest-lasting religious traditions, though, have found a place for both spirit and reason—a delicate balance to produce, but it can be done. Holding the movement of the spirit up to the light of reason can cause deeper truths to emerge.

Take an example. Malcolm X famously went on the *hajj* to Mecca. He participated in the ritual circling the Ka’ba and all the associated ceremonies. And he reported that he had a spiritual experience of the unity of all. He wrote about it this way:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white....

In the past I permitted myself to be used... to make sweeping indictments of all white people, the entire white race, and these generalizations have caused injuries to some whites who perhaps did not deserve to be hurt. Because of the spiritual enlightenment which I was blessed to receive as the result of my recent pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca, I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of any one race. I am now striving to live the life of a true Sunni Muslim.

Malcolm X had an experience of oneness, a spiritual experience, and then

he held that experience up to the light of reason and found a deeper truth of practical unity. The process matters because he could have responded differently. He could have rejected his spiritual experience because it contradicted what he had believed over time, and said, “Oh, that was just the *hajj*. It’s like that. It’s not real life.” He could have been unreflective about the spiritual experience and set it aside.

Instead, he said, “There is something real, something of truth, something holy here that I need to acknowledge. And when I hold up the lessons of the spiritual experience, I find them consistent with reason and reality. These things are true, despite my previous experiences and beliefs that caused me not to accept them. We really are united.”

It’s important to recognize that he did not dismiss other realities he already knew, such as American racism and the experiences of suffering that he had endured as an African American. He continued to work against racism, but with a different inspiration, different philosophy, and different goals. His spiritual experience had shown him a new way, but one that had continuity with his past. The unexpected confronted him, and he responded with mind, heart and soul.

The gospel of John says, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Spirit brings the unexpected. Sometimes spirit sneaks up on us and we connect with it unbidden. Sometimes we seek and seek for it and maybe we find it and maybe we don’t. Spirit, like wind, is elusive and ever moving. Spirit empowers and equips, enlivens and inspires. It is our job to be open to its movement, and to respond with our minds, hearts and souls. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
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“I love seeing that you’re entertaining earth spirits in the yard,” the man said to me, bending his head so that his tall frame could fit through my front door. He was a friend of a friend, someone I hadn’t met before, and with his unusually tall presence and bright pink face, I felt as if he might be from another world—a magical world.

Feeling every bit a muggle (non-magical person), I responded, puzzled. “Entertaining earth spirits?”

“Well, what do you call what you’re doing out there?” he asked, waving his hand out the window at the flowers and herbs and vegetables that were flourishing where a lawn had once been.

“Um...gardening?” I responded, again feeling the chasm between our worlds. And our conversation went on from there to other things.

It took me, literally, years to understand what he had said to me, and why he had said it. It came clear gradually in other conversations. “You’re such an extrovert,” a friend said. “It amazes me that you are happy for hours at a time, alone in your garden.” I responded with shock. “Alone? Are you kidding? I’m surrounded by thousands of little green friends out there!”

Or, another day, I said to a friend, “The plants told me they are really upset by the violence of the machines doing the roadwork.” With a look bordering on fear, perhaps wondering how grounded I was in reality, my friend responded, “The plants don’t really talk to you, do they?” “Not with words,” I said. “But they make themselves very clear.”

And then I realized: maybe some people who are also gardeners don’t engage with plants in mutual relationship

in the way that I do. Maybe not everyone experiences friendship and spiritual communion with plants. Maybe my kind of relatedness could indeed be called “entertaining earth spirits.”

I have always, from my youngest days, felt a deep kinship with the earth; I have known the earth and the natural world as living companions. I think most kids do, given proximity. When a big tree in our front yard had to be cut down because of heart rot, my three-year-old self sobbed and sobbed, sputtering out between spasms of wracking pain, “But she’s my sister!” And for most of the existence of humankind, entire cultures have known our interrelatedness, have honored the living earth.

Nowadays, in modern cultures, it is easy to feel as if we humans inhabit a mostly inanimate world. Even something as completely animate as the meat

that some of us eat comes to us in neatly wrapped packages, in no way resembling the living animal it was cut from. In the U.S., farmers whose survival used to depend on knowing the earth intimately now sit atop giant machines with air conditioning and music, distanced from their crops. The oil that we put in our cars so that we can speed on cement highways is dredged up from under the earth in places far from us, and many of the foods that we eat come from places we’ll never see.

It delights me to know that many indigenous languages conceptualize the world not in relentlessly categorized boxes of male and female, but by whether any particular piece of it is animate or inanimate. Once I started trying to do that myself, I realized how much I label “things.” English is 70% nouns, I hear, while many indigenous

languages are predominantly verbs. Verbs describe motion, action, life. Nouns so often put things in boxes.

I’ve been in many rooms where people are trying to put words like soul and spirit in a box, and the words simply won’t stay put. Once, in a seminary class on spirituality, we had a weekly assignment of finding three new definitions of spirituality. Twelve weeks, thirty-six definitions. None of the definitions were completely adequate, and the process freed me from trying to define words, per se, and opened me more in a commitment to experience them.

How do we stay connected to the essence of life that runs through the animate world? That’s the gist of spiritual practice, I think. For me, spiritual practice is any activity that opens me

How do we stay connected to the essence of life that runs through the animate world?

up to life’s vast web of animacy, done in a deliberate and steady way. (There are many other experiences that are spiritual, but come upon me without planning or warning.) For half the year, gardening is my primary spiritual practice, and I’m out there at dawn for a few hours daily.

For the other half, I patch in various practices with less consistency: improv classes, certain kinds of movement, spiritually grounded activism, singing with other people, sitting quietly in candlelight each morning reading a meditation. These activities, at least some of the time, open me up to eternity, show me life’s vast horizon, connect me to all that is living.

Entertain earth spirits? You bet I do! And every other kind of spirit that comes to the door! ■



June 2017

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

There are a whole lot of words from poets and preachers and wise folks of various types that have changed how I understand the world, but there's one quote that has maybe shaped what I've done with my life more than any other. I was already a minister when I read these words from Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies: "Life is just a chance to grow a soul."

Life is just a chance to grow a soul. I guess I'd always assumed that whatever a soul was, it was something that a person just came with. But this understanding of soul struck me as both right and helpful. Maybe a soul is not something we just have—maybe it is something we create. Maybe soul is the part of us that is mature and kind and connected to other beings. Maybe our soul grows when we are filled with wonder. Maybe the soul is the seat of our creativity, our ability to contribute something to the world that is uniquely our own. Maybe soul is the spark within that moves us to act, to try to build a better world.

What came to me as a kind of revelation is that this was the best understanding of church that I had ever heard—or at least the understanding of church that felt closest to my own sense of what I was called to do. The point of the church is to help us grow our souls. Whatever happens at church—preaching or teaching or singing or marching or praying or meeting or chatting together over coffee or the internet—the point of it is that we grow our souls. Which is to say that church life, all of church life, is religious education. Or, as people have come to call it more recently, religious growth and learning. Or faith formation. What church does, or at least what church should do, is to help us to expand that part of us that cares and wonders and creates and connects.



So I went back to school to get a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) degree in religious education, not because

I had any intention of leaving the parish ministry, but rather because I wanted to follow this flash of insight that all of what we do in church is supposed to be religious education—growing our souls. Now, it so happened that I did end up leaving the parish ministry to become a religious educator, and my title at the CLF is minister for lifespan learning. I think of myself as a religious educator and I think of myself as a minister and I can't really see that there is particularly a difference between the two.

My work at the CLF includes writing materials for families to use for religious exploration, and my work at the CLF includes being part of the worship team that plans and leads our online worship services. And both, as I understand them, are simply part of our ongoing efforts to help people find ways to grow their souls—to understand more deeply and more specifically the ways in which we can live out our best selves and experience our essential connectedness to all beings.

So, how does one go about growing a soul? Plants need earth and air and water and sunlight in order to grow. What do souls need? How exactly does one go about tending a soul? Souls, it seems, are complicated and contradictory. I have watched them grow through times of deep sorrow but I've also seen them expand through experiences of joy. A friend of mine talked about how the death of her father led to her feeling connected with all others who had experienced such grief—and the recognition that each and every person she talked to had their own experience of grief. But with this very same friend I have experienced my soul expanding in the joy of shared singing and dancing.

Time alone in meditation or reflection or study or prayer can grow a soul,

but so can times of intense connection with other people. We might feel our soul expand as we sit alone under a tree, but we are just as likely to experience that sensation of the soul stretching in deeply honest conversation or in marching together with thousands of other people in pursuit of justice.

The soul grows when we stay true to our own unique selves, refusing to simply go along with the crowd, but the soul also grows when we experience the ways in which we are inseparable from other people—and, indeed, from all the beings of this planet, whether or not they are human. There is no great art without personal freedom of expression, but it is also true that art is only great when it connects us to something larger than our own small selves.

I'm not sure that there's a simple, straightforward answer to what grows a soul, any more than there is a simple, straightforward answer to what exactly a soul is. But maybe soul is the part of us that experiences yearning for something more, and the way to grow it is to follow wherever that yearning might lead us. ■

Help us be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flows. —May Sarton



The CLF welcomes all who want to nourish their souls. We are here to provide a place of comfort, spiritual growth and belonging.

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We live in succession, in division, in parts,
in particles. Meantime within [us] is the
soul of the whole; the wise silence; the
universal beauty, to which every part and
particle is equally related, the eternal
ONE. And this deep power in which we
exist and whose beatitude is all accessible
to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect
in every hour, but the act of seeing and the
thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the
subject and the object, are one. We see the
world piece by piece, as the sun, the
moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole,
of which these are shining parts, is the
soul.

by **Ralph Waldo Emerson**,
from his essay "*The Over-Soul*,"
published in 1841

