

Soul food, Soul mate, Soul music, Soul work; each of these points to something deep in the human experience. Not of the intellect, or even of the emotions – although both can be involved. It's that part of being human that taps into what Annie Dillard names the "silent hum" of the world. Something beyond words, or articulation, but not beyond experience.

What does it mean to have a soul?

I remember as a second grader with Sister Regina Marie leaning about the soul – and about how "scientists" had done experiments on human bodies and could find no such thing as a soul. It was then concluded that souls did not exist. Sister winked at us conspiratorially – because even in second grade we knew better. Just because you couldn't see your soul didn't mean it wasn't fully part of your life. Somehow at 7, I understood that there was more to me than my body, that there was something beyond my fingers and toes, my worries and fears. Something which gave space to my little life.

What was that? It's what the ancients called 'anima.' That part that animates living beings – separates them from inanimate rock and stone. Something that is present and can be experienced but which is also indefinable.

Folks sitting a deathbed vigil have experienced it. It was one of the most powerful parts of the chaplain experience for me when I worked in a Hospital. It didn't matter if how recently the person had been conscious – some had been suffering from dementia for years. As the loved ones sat around bearing witness to their passage it was remarkable how the atmosphere in the room changed once someone had died. Before, no matter how shallowly they were breathing or how long they had been unconscious, there was a presence in the room.

Once the last breath had been taken, and the unremitting monitors fell to flat line, something changed. The flesh and blood that had moments before held life did so no longer and the person who had inhabited that body was gone. It was a powerful moment of noticing the stark difference between life and death.

I think it's no coincidence that the feast of All Souls, which is an amalgam of Christian and Pagan practices, happens in late autumn. The vibrancy of life has gone. The greens after giving way to bursts of red and yellow have fallen away completely. The branches left behind look bleak and lifeless. But this is not the case. While slowing to a period of rest and dormancy, the foliage outside our windows is still very much alive. The soul of nature still beats on with its trustworthy rhythms.

Life will blossom again.

The feast of All Souls was a chance to affirm that deep hum in life. To affirm a deeper connection to all those who had passed and to celebrate the ongoing song of life in the here and now. Celtic and Wiccan traditions say fall is a 'thin' time; a time when the veil between life and death becomes more permeable. Loved ones who had passed from life to death are remembered and celebrated.

That's why we've set up this altar of remembrance in the chancel this morning. We had invited folks to bring in pictures of loved ones to share with us today. I've added pictures of William Channing Gannett & Gussie Joshi & books and registers of people whose lives still live on in this building. I also brought over the altar table that was originally used in the church. We no longer hold regular communion services but this table was an integral part of morning worship at one point in the history of the church.

Like a picture which recalls the essence of a person, this table recalls the essence of an earlier generation of church members. It is part of the deeper truth of this community and something to remember as we look back and honor what it means to be members of the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale.

All Souls. It's a holy day for many faith traditions and it's also the name of dozens of our UU churches

across the country. When researching online I stopped counting at 26 but there were many more Google pages to follow. Why is this Christian feast day such a common name for our churches? What was the difference between saints and souls that our ancestors wished to hold up when naming their congregations?

One clue comes from our Universalist history. The UUA webpage states:

“From its beginnings, Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. The Gloucester church included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown...”

The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and this eventually became central to their belief that lasting truth is found in all religions, and that dignity and worth is innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class”

But it started with the notion that everyone – every single person – would be welcomed by the love of God and by our communities. While other denominations celebrated those folks who attained sainthood, ours chose to honor the everyman – all of humanity. Our churches used the All Souls designation to affirm our theology – everyone is welcome. Everyone is beloved of that reality some name God. Every single person, by virtue of simply being alive, has their own worth and dignity. In fact many affirm the worth and dignity of every being. While some faiths do not believe that animals have souls, we recognize the beauty and truth visible in all life. Our seventh principle, affirming respect for the interconnected web of which we all are part, already points in that direction.

We honor All Souls – everything animated, everything alive, everything participating in this blessed reality, visible or invisible, macroscopic or microscopic, human or otherwise. Today we stop and listen for the hum of the universe; we call ourselves into an awareness of the myriad ways life is present, the abundant systems, experiences and shapes and forms. And we do so within a spiritual framework. Spirituality is that aspect of the human which helps us pause in the busyness of life and remember our deeper connection to what the poet David Whyte calls the sacred otherness of life.

Because you all know how easy it is to forget. How easy it is to get caught up in the doing, the accomplishing, the overcoming, the accumulating. I've taken spiritual searching as my vocation and I still have to actively remind myself to just stop and listen for that hum.

The Vedas, ancient Hindu scriptures, say that one syllable holds the entire universe within its sound. Om. Oaiume. When you fill yourself up with the sound of it, it connects to that deeper source of being. In fact I love the way the Hindu faith views reality. The ground of all of reality is an unchanging and unchangeable reality called Brahman. Everything that is manifest in the world, everything temporal and changing, all life as we know, rises up from Brahman and then returns to it again when it's through.

There is no heaven or hell, no judgment or punishment, simply a return to the ground of being from which we all came. This comforts me. There is something solid and reliable in a universe that gives abundantly and receives back again in kind.

Parker Palmer said today that the soul is tough, resilient, and savvy. That it is that part which keeps us alive when all of our other faculties want to give up and die. It connects our physical bodies to that deeper call of life, inviting us to more life, more abundance. More. It's good to be in touch with our soul; good to take the time to get to recognize and know it. To understand our relationship to it and to trust it will carry us through when we need it.

To be clear – this is not the concept of soul I had as a second grader with Sister Regina Marie. Back then your soul was a kind of white ghost like apparition which followed you around and which could be stained by the myriad sins you might commit. Tell a lie – there's a black mark on your soul. Hurt someone – a bigger smudge. Miss mass on Sunday – oh my, there's a huge black blot that will threaten to take you under (as in down to HE double toothpicks) unless you scurry into the confessional and wipe it clean again. Life was like constantly being in dress clothes, always making sure you didn't mess up and dirty that immaculate soul you got at your baptism.

No, this concept of soul is much more like a telephone wire connecting us to that deep hum of the universe. It's the place where the bodies we live within connect with the deepest reality of being alive.

Our Transcendentalist ancestor, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

There were times when I could not afford
to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment
to any work, whether of the head or hands. ...
Sometimes, in a summer morning,
having taken my accustomed bath,
I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon,
rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs,
in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sing around...
I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better
than any work of the hands would have been.....
They were not time subtracted from my life,
But so much more over and above my usual allowance.

How do you make space for the soul to speak its truth to you? Where do you open up moments of connection with that which is so much larger than our own tiny identities? There is no one right answer because each individual has a different path to that we name divine. Some faith traditions counsel asceticism, some devotion, some spiritual practice of generosity or silence or prayer.

But almost every faith tradition says you must begin in the present moment. The future will not feed you – it might never arrive, the past can only inform memory and mind. It is only in the moment where we stand every single instant that you can connect with the deeper call of soul.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote:

Our true home is the present moment.
...It is not a matter of faith,
It is a matter of practice.

Such a beautiful thought – not a matter of faith – of knowing what to believe. It's a matter of making time to practice this turning inward toward the present moment. My partner, Karen, has an app on her phone. It rings a chime at random times throughout the day, reminding her – and us if I'm in the room – to stop and pay attention. You can do it at any time in your day. Stop. Pay attention. Listen for the hum of life.

A few weeks back we heard the story of a young Theodore Parker who was kept from killing a turtle by a voice in his head which said stop. His mother told him it was the voice of his conscience telling him what was true and right. She told him he needed to practice listening, because with practice you become good at hearing it. Without practice you can lose the ability to hear it at all.

Find a way to practice which fits your life. My own practice is to wake early and sit on my couch looking out the front window with a cup of tea. I listen to the clock ticking and open up to the silence of the house and just breathe. If I want to be intentional about holding people or events in my heart I will light a candle and then simply sit for 20 minutes or so. Mostly I just pay attention. What rises up? What colors are dancing outside? What sensations are happening in my being? It's a time to listen for that deeper hum. To remember the stillness at the center of a life that can get overwhelming and overfull, overpowering.

What works for you? How do you connect to your soul?

I had a dear older gentleman down in Chattanooga who came to me after a service and said – “I don't believe in the spirituality stuff – it doesn't have anything to do with me.” I smiled. He was a woodworker and cabinet maker and created beautifully worked pieces. I said I was surprised because I felt my most spiritual when painting – and I saw the beauty of his soul revealed in the woodwork he did. How did he feel as he worked on his creations?

He stopped and thought a while & then said – Hmm, maybe... And then he went on to tell me of how he felt when he went hunting, and was sitting quietly in a tree stand, and how connected he felt to nature and the world when he was out there all alone. “You might be one of the most spiritual people I know” I teased him. And he smiled.

Each of us holds eternity within our being. Each of us will eventually be the dust that dances in the wind, but in this moment let us recognize and celebrate our connection to the deep hum of life singing the song of the soul.

Poem (the spirit likes to dress up)
by **Mary Oliver**

The spirit
likes to dress up like this:
ten fingers,
ten toes,

shoulders, and all the rest
at night
in the black branches,
in the morning

in the blue branches
of the world.
It could float, of course,
but would rather

plumb rough matter.
Airy and shapeless thing,
it needs
the metaphor of the body,

line and appetite,
the oceanic fluids;
it needs the body's world,
instinct

and imagination
and the dark hug of time,
sweetness
and tangibility,

to be understood,
to be more than pure light
that burns
where no one is --

so it enters us --
in the morning
shines from brute comfort
like a stitch of lightning;

and at night
lights up the deep and wondrous
drownings of the body
like a star.

