

Grow Your Soul

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak

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First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies once said that “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.” As a child I was taught that the soul was the life that God gave me; that it was separate from the body, the part of me that would have eternal life. Its welfare and future depended solely on my goodness and holiness, on what I did here on earth. And the health of our souls was our ultimate concern, as it belonged ultimately to God - and let me tell you, that was not very comforting. It was an impossible, scary and overwhelming idea.

However, I managed to discover some much more helpful ideas about the soul over time. The ancient Greeks thought of the soul as the life force - the philosopher Aristotle wrote that it is the “life-giving principle.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson thought of the soul as that potential within each human being for living the fullest life, and this soul was part of “the Oversoul”, united with the eternal One. It was that divine spark, a power accessible to us in every moment, sensible in many ways.

In her book *Revolution from Within*, Gloria Steinem wrote: (1993)

Several millennia worth of observers have believed that a unique and true self resides in each of us. It may be suppressed or nurtured, thwarted or developed -- but it is there... as Plato said: "The soul knows who we are from the beginning."

Thomas Moore, a former professor of religion and psychology, writes in his book *Care of the Soul*, that

“it is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise, and the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth...”

In his book *SOUL, An Archaeology*, Phil Cousineau offers this explanation:

Soul defies definition, yet it surrounds us, permeating every aspect of our lives and culture from art, music, and literature to religion, society, and identity. ... Soul is that unmistakable fire that infuses all truly creative endeavors and sends the shiver up the spine, telling us we’re in the presence of lived truth.

“...the shiver up the spine, telling us we’re in the presence of lived truth.” That would be, I think, a good way to describe that other idea of “soul” I am more familiar, the “soul music” of the African American tradition that gave my youth - that unique combination of gospel, rhythm & blues and jazz.

And Mary Oliver has this to say, in a poem called *Some Questions You Might Ask*:

Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?

Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it, and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight? What about roses,
and lemons, and their shining leaves?
What about the grass?

Yes, what about the grass? and stones? and roses? and the anteater who loves her children?

Everything's got soul... Maybe we don't need all this theory or theology about recognizing or saving our souls... perhaps all we need do is take a poet's word for it!

The soul is not something supernatural or ephemeral, fanciful or irrelevant. It is not so much a reflection of God but really a reflection of our humanity... our ability and inclination to incorporate more than our bodily existence and needs into our every-day lives.

Parker Palmer, in his book *A Hidden Wholeness: the Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, says that the soul is force calling us in a certain direction in life... keeping us rooted in the ground of our own being; keeping us connected to the community, in relationships where we find life; The soul reveals the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether that truth is easy or hard to hear; and our souls give us life - and encourages us to become life-givers in a world that deals too much death.

Growing our souls is essential for us as individuals, for us in our families - and for us in this congregation! Especially in times of trial or ambiguity or change or even in something as positive as growth. We need to grow our souls... and we don't have to be philosophers who spend our days thinking big thoughts, or poets like Mary Oliver, spending days roaming the marshes and shores and fields of Cape Cod.

To know and grow our souls means that we show up, are fully present to life, however it comes at us; however we embrace, recoil or revel in it. From the moment of birth onward, the soul or our true self is assailed by deforming forces from without and within: by racism, sexism, economic

injustice, and other social cancers; by jealousy, resentment, self-doubt, fear, and other demons of the inner life. So we must pay attention, nurture and grow our souls in healthy, life-affirming ways. We are continually engaged in the evolution of self and world -- and we have the power to choose, moment by moment, between that which gives life and that which deals death. In a way, we have no choice - we must engage with life. And that is where another poet - Walt Whitman - can be our guide.

As Reverend Vic Carpenter reminded us just a few weeks ago, poetry was the social media of the 19th century... and I imagine that Whitman and his timely reflections on life was sharing his posts - his leaves - as freely.

Never shying away from the rough and tumble of it, always open to whatever creation had to offer, Whitman was more than willing to engage life even as he was well aware of its eventuality – death.

*However sweet these laid-up stores -
however convenient this dwelling,
we cannot remain here;
However sheltered this port, and however calm these waters,
we must not anchor here;*

[And I get to remember him each week, offer gratitude for his life - which began almost 200 years ago - when I drive across the bridge named in his honor... a rather ungainly span (as was the poet himself!) across the Delaware connecting two cities, but still full of possibility.]

Whitman grew up on Long Island and Brooklyn New York and wherever he was, his wide-ranging interests, curiosity, observant eye and reflective nature nurtured his poet-soul. He was unconventional in many ways, a proponent of free thought and causes of equality. He was not an ivory-tower intellectual or a reclusive poet, but a person of and in the world. It was one thing to rail against the evils of slavery and the calamitous Civil War. Whitman responded by going to the battlefields and hospitals, doing what he could to nurse and comfort the wounded soldiers. While not a radical reformer manning the ramparts, his writing and his life often issued a kind of clarion call.

*There is something that comes to one now and perpetually,
It is not what is printed, preach'd, discussed, it eludes discussion
and print,
It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book,
It is for you whoever you are, it is no farther from you than your
hearing and sight are from you,
It is hinted by nearest, commonest, readiest, it is ever provoked
by them.*

As we wrestle with so many conflicting and challenging ideas and identities, as we struggle in our lives and in our religious institution to define who we are, and as we face this time of great and exciting transition - this culmination of hopes and this new beginning... I think Whitman has something to say to us now. He says, in Song of Myself - *I believe a leaf of grass in no less than the journey-work of the stars* – he reminds us that we are part of something grand - that the simple

ordinary blade of grass is as amazing as the cosmos. This soul, this creative force of love... is there, in a blade of grass as much as in our intelligent brains.

The soul is nurtured by being engaged with the worlds we inhabit, where we encounter, good and bad; and engaged in worlds we might enter experience but can know in other ways. In *Song of Myself* Whitman writes:

*I am the man—I suffer'd—I was there.
...The disdain and calmness of olden martyrs;
The mother, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her children gazing on;
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing, cover'd with sweat;
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck—the murderous buckshot and the
bullets;
All these I feel, or am.*

All these I feel, or am. Whitman encounters life as an experience filled with amazement, beauty, even as it is an experience of death, the horrors of war, and pain and cruelty. Even in its most discomfiting moments, Whitman's writings express a confidence in our human capacity for empathy, suffering, compassion and knowledge. Whitman indicates – he does not explain, but suggests – that there is so much more to life's journey than just the passage of time. There are marvels within moments, the world within our embrace, the other a refraction of our own selves. And there is more we can be, a wider expanse of human community than our eyes alone might reveal.

His was an out-sized example of the life of a poet, and throughout his work he suggested we might go and do likewise. Not that we'd all go out and write poetry, but to live an engaged, attentive and compassionate life. This is a kind of soul-filled living. If we keep our unique essential self alive to our daily routine and in our ongoing meaning making, we are less likely to lose sight of, or sense of, who we really are. We are less likely to become unmoored, adrift and disconnected in a sea of confusion. Although he wouldn't put it this way, I think Walt Whitman believed we human beings are here on earth to grow our souls. Whitman's writing, while not pretty in a conventional way, or even in its form, expresses a boldness of spirit. Indeed, his revolutionary nature often caused consternation in his contemporaries, and censure from his critics. For Whitman was a poet of the erotic, celebrating the physicality of the life-force in vivid phrases and ideas.

*The light and shade, the curious sense of body and identity, the
greed that with perfect complaisance devours all things,
The endless pride and outstretching of man, unspeakable joys
and sorrows,
The wonder every one sees in every one else he sees, and the
wonders that fill each minute of time forever,
What have you reckon'd them for, camerado?*

We are heirs to the champions of reason in religion, to the high marks set for us by the likes of Channing and Emerson in the forming of Unitarianism in this country. Whitman, an almost Universalist counterpart, invites us to marry heart and mind, body and soul, in this enterprise we call life. And from that all religion will spring.

Whitman the poet, and Whitman the man, remind us of what matters in life. Can this help us through the miasma of 21st century life? His words, archaic in their 19th century style and attitude, can still guide us on our way.

In the Preface to that first version of *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855, he offers this advice:

This is what you shall do:

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks,
stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others,
hate tyrants, argue not concerning God,
have patience and indulgence toward the people,
take off your hat to nothing known or unknown
or to any man or number of men,
go freely with powerful uneducated persons
and with the young and with the mothers of families,
read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life,
re-examine all you have been told at school or church
or in any book,
dismiss whatever insults your own soul;
and your very flesh shall be a great poem
and have the richest fluency not only in its words
but in the silent lines of its lips and face
and between the lashes of your eyes
and in every motion and joint of your body... .

The work of the poet is left for us to do.



For "readings", see #645 (*Song for the Open Road*) and #659 (*For You*) in *Singing the Living Tradition*, the "grey hymnal" (UUA 1993)