

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The Soul of the Whole

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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FIRST READING*Thich Naht Hanh (adapted)*

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply:

I arrive in every second to be a bud on a spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile, learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.
I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands,
and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to my people,
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once...
Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

SECOND READING*from the Israeli poet Zelda (adapted)*

*Each of us has a name
given by the source of life
and given by our parents*

*Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear*

*Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls*

*Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors*

*Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing*

*Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love*

*Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work*

*Each of us has name
given by the seasons and given by the sea
given by our death
and given by the source of life.*

The Soul of the Whole

A meditation from John O'Donohue:

*We seldom notice how each day is a holy place
Where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,
Transforming our broken fragments
Into an eternal continuity that keeps us.*

*Somewhere in us a dignity presides
That is more gracious than the smallness
That fuels us with fear and force,
A dignity that trusts the form a day takes.*

*So at the end [start] of this day, we give thanks
For being betrothed to the unknown
And for the secret work*

*Through which the mind of the day
And wisdom of the soul become one.*

I like the small container of a single day. I like the intersection of the mind of the day and the wisdom of the soul, the place (the moment?) at which Time – which is eternal, and external – meets the little spark of us, the tiny flash of life and light that is each one of us, as happens every time each one of us wakes up. “The mind of the day and the wisdom of the soul become one.” It’s an uncommon way to think of common things.

*Somewhere in us a dignity presides
That is more gracious than the smallness
That fuels us with fear and force...*

*Within the holy place that is this day,
may our broken fragments be transformed,
our dignity restored,
our spirits safely held within
the eternal continuity that keeps us.*

I like that time-bending, space-shaping sense of the soul and eternity.

It seems to me we speak here all the time and all at once of two kinds of spiritual integrity, two ways of being deeply, liberally, religious - one way looking inward, one looking outward- that present a kind of paradox. Our work as Unitarian Universalists, 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; things inside us and among us can 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 “quickening.” We could argue all day long about when exactly it begins – but we won’t, today. 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. One of you wrote, recently, “Soul is more eternal than personality. It is the indwelling of the spirit, the true self, the real self. Sometimes we can lose it.” John O’Donohue, who was a Catholic priest and a strong, 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 human person, present from the start. If we have any doctrine to deliver to our children here, and especially to teenagers, 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 here, what all of us are learning here.

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, but grounded in the ground, in the natural, physical world. This is the awareness that whatever we are as human, living beings is deeply interfused, interwoven, interconnected and interdependent with everything else. That’s true at a molecular level, 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 sap and glacial ice, and among and within the animals, fishes, birds, the grasses and the trees – the spirit of life. When people here say, as they often do, “I believe that when we die our energy dissipates back into the energy of everything,” I think this is what they mean. This is 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.* It’s a little different from 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 this sense that the divinity in each touches the divinity in all.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian, wrote famously (and somewhat densely) about what he called “The Over-Soul:”

[We] are a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence... [It is] that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every [person’s] particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, ... to which all right action is submission. [It is a] deep power in which we exist ... We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul of the whole, the wise silence; the universal beauty, ... the eternal ONE. It is undefinable, unmeasurable, but we know that it pervades and contains us. And just as there is no ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no wall between the soul and God. The walls are taken away.

In the twentieth century, sometime later, the poet Carl Sandburg said it much more 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 you that is uniquely your own, and also as the part of you that makes you 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 we say the mission of our church is “to grow our souls and serve the world,” we’re speaking of one continuous endeavor.

What does it look like in real life, in real time, in the practical, day-to-day, the 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 one of you posted on Facebook a picture of a bathroom door, one of the restrooms down the hall, in this 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, Anna Gehres, and 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. You’ve noticed this year, maybe, that our signs keeps changing. Right now, 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 labelled “all gender,” and on the other two (one with the small label “women” and one with the 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 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 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 nametags here, 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. Even now, as of Friday, Minnesota lawmakers are trying to move such legislation forward, requiring everyone to use one of two bathrooms corresponding to the gender stated on their birth certificate. We can laugh a little at how on earth and who could possibly enforce this – 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.

Please call me by my true names.

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 - they all have to 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 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 I we learn, and take risks, and make mistakes and scatter forgiveness like wildflower seeds, everywhere we go.

Some time ago a member here spoke about their understanding of the soul:

I think of the light in a human as the inspiration to create in our own ways, in relationships, in intellectual and soul-felt pursuits. I was created to be a life-partner and parent, a singer, a wordsmith. My big questions have been about creative inspiration, about what breathes life into a human no matter their human circumstance; [my questions have been about whom to thank by name when I see beauty, to whom to direct my voice when I sing, who hears me when I wail out with affliction or grief. I no longer identify myself as a fundamentalist Christian, and many who call themselves Christian would not recognize me as kindred, but I believe God knows my name.

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 self, original self – and more than that. I think of that exercise in consciousness-raising in which participants are asked to name ten things that define them as persons. 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, a baker, a 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 / or on-line 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 – till 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, accomplishments, 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? 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 all your whole life long, shining your bright flame, and warming your hands at the hearths of strangers and lovers, and everyone else.

*Each of us has a name
given by the source of life
and given by our parents*

*Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear*

*Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls*

*Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors*

*Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing*

*Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love*

*Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work*

*given by the sea
and given by the seasons,
given by our death
and by the source of life.*