

The Soul

by Todd F. Eklof (04-13-03)

Many years ago, when I first began exploring Unitarian Universalism, I visited Louisville' First Unitarian Church for what was only my third time in a UU church. On that particular day a former minister of the church who left in the 1960's to become a psychotherapist was guest speaking. His message, to say the least, was completely different than anything I'd ever heard as a Southern Baptist, and most of it, admittedly, was completely over my head. In fact, it's safe to say I didn't understand a word he said!

Oddly enough, however, I found his words completely captivating and felt something stirring deep within me. He was speaking about the soul, something I don't think I'd ever heard anyone talk about in church before. Southern Baptists, like most traditional Christian churches, teach that Jesus saves souls but don't really seem to know or care what this means, or what exactly it is he's suppose to be saving. The message I heard at First Unitarian Church was quite different. The speaker did not talk about the soul as if it is something that needs to be saved, or something we will experience in the afterlife. He spoke, rather, as if the soul is a living and vibrant force, dwelling in everyone and everything right here and right now.

I recall him specifically saying that even automobiles have souls. Think about the implications of this statement; not only is the soul a present and vital force, but it even exists in the things we treat as objects. If cars have souls, then so might everything else, meaning we live in a world void of objects; soul is everywhere, permeating everything. Imagine how different our lives together might be if all of us saw the world in this way, as if everything is alive and has depth and meaning.

Still, it's difficult for us to imagine that machines have souls; that a car, or an electric mixer, a television set, a screwdriver, a pencil, or things as seemingly as insignificant as toothpicks and paper clips, can possibly be imbued with soul. Such a thought might even make us uncomfortable because so long as we can treat these things as soulless objects, we're able to use them and discard them as we see fit, without regard or gratitude for their meaning in this world or in our lives.

Unfortunately, over the past few hundred years our scientific paradigm has given us a mechanistic world view in which we have come to regard the entire Universe as nothing more than a big object, without purpose, intelligence or intention. As such, we are now able to objectify everything—plants, animals, even each other, because we are all part of the machine and we know machines don't have souls. We rape and ravage the Earth because she is no longer our Great Mother, but merely a dead chunk of rock floating in space, held in position by the gravitational laws of the well oiled machine. So, like all objects, we are in a mad rush to use her and deplete her resources until she no longer serves our purpose. Such a devastating perspective results in the loss of nearly 150 acres of rainforest every sixty seconds. Each year we destroy 78,000 acres of rainforest, the lungs of our planet, which is equivalent to an area the size of Poland. In Brazil alone we're losing 5.4 million acres a day, where it's estimated that six to nine million

indigenous peoples once lived. Today there are less than 200,000 remaining. In addition, some scientists estimate that close to 150 life forms will become extinct today alone, amounting to the loss of 50,000 species each year.¹

Our mechanistic world view also makes it easier for us to treat others as objects. The decimation of the Native American peoples by white settlers occurred, in part, because they were viewed by their oppressors as mere savages without souls. The same was considered true of those unfortunate Africans torn from their roots and sold into slavery, their descendants persecuted and oppressed to this day. Many religions also teach that women have no souls, which is why they have been and remain oppressed in many places around the world. For fundamentalist Muslims who sees others as soulless infidels, or conservative Christians who see them as unsaved souls, it becomes easy, even justifiable, to harm and kill innocent people. Objectifying others makes it much easier for us to make war our first choice rather than our last when it comes to resolving conflicts. Without a living and vibrant notion of the soul, it becomes almost as easy to discard others as it does a paper cup once it has been used.

Larry Dossey, M.D., begins his book, *Recovering the Soul*, by asking why, in our age of science, should we even speak of the soul? "The main reason," he answers, "is that something vital has been left out of almost all the modern efforts to understand our mental life—something that counts as a first principle, without which everything is bound to be incomplete and off base."² Certainly, as I have described it, the situation in the world today seems off base. But if the solution to our many problems involves recovering the soul, perhaps we ought to begin by recovering the mere notion of soul.

As I said, the sermon I heard at First Unitarian Church so many years ago now, stirred something deep inside me. For the first time in my life that thing I had learned to reject as something lost, dead and unreal had been touched, or, perhaps, was touching me, letting me know it is a present and living reality begging my attention. Since then, as Dossey puts it, the "first principle" of my spiritual and academic pursuit has been toward soul. As rewarding and transformational as this quest has been, I must admit, I am no closer to understanding what the soul is than I am to understanding what God is. My suspicion is that they are one and the same, just as the ancient Gnostics believed everyone and everything contains a spark of the divine. This divine spark, this fleck of God, might be what we refer to as soul.

Today the word *soul* connotes a variety of different meanings. For some it refers to the immaterial part of one's being, or to one's life force. For others it is the total self. Some view it as no more than a ghost or phantom that goes to heaven and sometimes returns to the world after the body dies, while others think of it as a particular feeling expressed in music and other forms of art. The word itself comes from the German word *saiwalo* meaning "belonging to the sea." This has many fascinating implications. Firstly, it may refer to the origin of all life from the sea. Initially the soul was seen as the vital force, as that which animates living things. Once things stop moving it is because they no longer have soul. In this sense, soul and life were once viewed as the same thing.

The connection of the soul with the sea may also be symbolic of the soul's nature, namely that it is mysterious and chaotic, similar to Carl Jung's notion of the unconscious which he sometimes spoke of in terms of "tidal" forces and "powerful waves." Jung, who was first and foremost a scientist, believed science, in shifting interest from the inner world to the outer world had allowed humanity to increase its understanding of nature a "thousandfold in comparison with earlier ages." Yet he also felt that our "experience of the inner world was correspondingly reduced." Because of this reduction of interest with our inner lives, Jung concluded, "The world had not only been deprived of its gods, but has lost its soul."

Keep in mind that the Greek word for "soul" is *psyche*, and it is often said that Jung attempted to put the soul back in *psychology*. Jung liked to use the Latin word for soul, *anima*, when referring to soul in human beings. This, again, gets back to the idea that the soul has something to do with the life force, with that which animates us, enables us to live, breathe and move. Such an idea of the soul makes it easier for us to recognize it as a vital force in the world and in all living things. Remember, the word *anima* is the root in the word *animal*. So it wouldn't be inaccurate to refer to animals as "souls."

We should also keep in mind, as anthropologist Jeremy Narby points out in his illuminating book, *The Cosmic Serpent*, that, "All the cells in the world contain DNA—be they animal, vegetal, or bacterial—and they are all filled with salt water, in which the concentration of salt is similar to that of the worldwide ocean." Narby provides provocative and convincing evidence the seat of the soul may very well be in our DNA, that substance which is the same in and shared by all living creatures. He also points out that DNA emits low frequency signals in the form of photons which may be responsible for the images we see in dreams, drug induced states and shamanic or spiritual visions. This may be the reason many of us often have the experience of communing with nature, especially when we escape all the distractions of civilizations. When we're alone in the woods, on a mountain, or near a lake, we may be more receptive to the low frequency transmissions emitted from the DNA we share in common with all living things.

This original notion that soul (*anima*, *psyche*) is in us and all around us in all things is a far cry from our contemporary Western notion of soul, provided by a Christianity, that views it merely as the seat of reason and will in human beings, and as a spiritual entity created by God that survives physical death. This has been an interesting development considering the Old Testament doesn't contain a developed notion of the soul, nor, for that matter, does the New Testament. The ancient Hebrews simply considered human beings as living bodies, or animated bodies and made no distinction between body and soul, or body and life. Once the body died that was the end of it.

Christianity, however, eventually emerged into the Graeco-Roman world along with its Platonic idea of an indestructible, immortal soul that would be saved upon its release from the body. As such, Platonism saw the world as an evil place from which the soul must be liberated. The early Christians, by contrast, influenced by their roots in Judaism, saw the world as God's gift and blessing, and believed any hope for life after death must involve the physical resurrection of the body. Since the body and the person were viewed

as one and the same thing, there was no soul to save, only a body to raise. By the middle ages, however, Platonism triumphed over the early Christian view. Even Thomas Aquinas, who tried to synthesize the two perspectives by claiming the body and soul are two aspects of one substance, or person, argued that in the end the soul can survive the body and be rejoined with it after the resurrection. This is the notion that eventually gave rise to the idea of Purgatory, that place souls go to wait until the final judgment.

By the 20th Century, neo-Reformers began rejecting all things rooted in Greek philosophy, including the idea of an immortal soul. Many of these were influenced by the emergence of *Existentialism*, and the idea of the soul itself became viewed as an objectification and was eliminated from theological debate. Instead, they began referring almost exclusively to the "self," which may be why we have come to act so selfishly instead of soulfully.

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake defines soul rather succinctly as "the animating principle, that which makes living things alive."⁹ He also reminds us that this animistic view of the soul has been the traditional view throughout the entire world and history with the exception of the past 350 years or so here in the West. The animistic view is that the soul is everywhere, in all things, like God. In the last few centuries, however, our culture has come to accept the anthropocentric notion that, at best, only humans have souls, and these can only be redeemed after death. "This story is so said," says Matthew Fox, "because we've said not only that the trees out there aren't alive and the fishes aren't alive, but also that they have no souls, the animals don't have souls, we're the only one's left with souls. No wonder we're so lonely!"¹⁰ Yet there is hope, through our awareness and reawakening to soul, to the vital force in us and all around us, that we can turn the current course of events that are bringing such devastation to our world, to Gaia, our Great Mother and all her children. If we stop objectifying our world, killing it in the process, we don't have to remain lonely because we can reconnect with the soul that permeates all of life; from the 125 billion miles of DNA swimming in a sea of salt in each human body, to the DNA animating the fish swimming in the deep blue sea, to the birds, and the squirrels, the grass and trees, and even our automobiles and paper cups, there is soul.

1 For these statistics and more see, http://www.ran.org/info_center/factsheets/04b.html

2 Dossey, Larry, M.D., *Recovering the Soul*, A Bantam Book, New York, NY, 1989, p.1.

3 Jung, C.G., *Dream Analysis*, Bollingen Series XCIX, Princeton University Press, 1984, p.386.

4 Ibid., p.140.

5 Jung, *Collected Works Vol. 5, Symbols of Transformation*, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, 1956, 1990, p.77.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Narby, Jeremy, *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1998, p.88.

9 Sheldrake, Rupert, & Fox, Matthew, *Natural Grace*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1996, p.75.

10 Ibid., p.81.