

Sermon

I begin with one of my favorite poems by Mary Oliver titled "The Journey"

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles,
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.

All of us know this struggle. We learned our lessons at two and three years old. To get what we want and avoid what we don't want, we have to deny ourselves. If we don't learn to do this, our parents will punish us. Next our friends will punish us. And if we still don't learn, then society will punish us. We constantly get the message as we grow up to stay in line, do what you're told, eat those damn vegetables, clean your plate, sit down and shut up. Is it any wonder we lose track of who we are and what our heart is calling us to do. Most of us had it literally or figuratively beaten out of us in our childhood. The result is what inspiring Quaker author Parker Palmer, calls, the divided self. He writes:

Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hid our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the "integrity that comes from being what you are."

I want to talk about the divided self while on the theme of diversity for this month because our internal divisions often prevent us from welcoming difference. A well known example is homophobia. Men who have deeply repressed homo-erotic feelings are some of the most hateful and violent people in relation to gay and bisexual men. Catholic priests who must suppress and deny their sexuality can act on those feelings in very inappropriate ways. In much milder ways, uncomfortable feelings can come up in our congregation around social, political, philosophical or theological differences that touch those inner divisions.

We are born completely whole and undivided. We know what we want and how we feel and we let everyone know about it. Being socialized begins the division process. Freud was rather insightful about how this works. Our inner three year old, he called the id, cries out for what it wants. The super ego, our internalized parenting, clamps down and says, NO! Gradually the ego evolves to manage the id and the super ego and does its best mediate between them.

For many of us, particularly those of us who function effectively in social settings, we learn to squash that inner three year old id energy. That id sometimes wants some pretty socially unacceptable things like having sex with our mother and killing our father or siblings. That id wants nothing less than global domination of its domain. If we want to get along with other people, we really have to hide the ugly socially unacceptable urges and replace them with much more salutary strivings the super ego would approve of. So the poor little id gets buried alive ... but doesn't die. He lurks in the background looking for a lapse in the ego's alertness to grab what it wants.

The temptation when looking at the id as a three year old wild man is to be happy to have this energy under control and safely suppressed. But in that division, an essential part of our being is devalued and discarded. It is a vital part of us Parker Palmer calls, our soul.

Now, the soul is a very problematic term for Unitarian Universalists. Some of us do not embrace the concept of an eternal soul that existed before we were born and continues after we are gone. I myself go with the Buddhists on this as they reject the idea of an eternal soul although they do recognize the process of reincarnation. I recognize the aversion some have to redefining words but our language just doesn't have another word that captures the fullness of our essential nature like the word soul does. I particularly like how author Thomas Moore, who wrote the book, *Care of the Soul*, defines soul as follows:

“Soul” is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance. I do not use the word here as an object of religious belief or as something to do with immortality. When we say that someone or something has soul, we know what we mean, but it is difficult to specify exactly what that meaning is.” (page 5)

We need a term for this human quality because in the socialization process of growing up and functioning in society, it tends to disappear. When we are out of touch with this dimension of our being, our quality of life can suffer tremendously. Parker Palmer writes:

The divided life is a wounded life and the soul keeps calling us to heal the wound. Ignore the call and we find ourselves trying to numb the pain with an anesthetic of choice, be it substance abuse, overwork, consumerism, or mindless media noise. Such anesthetics are easy to come by in a society that wants to keep us divided and unaware of our own pain—for the divided life, that is pathological for individuals, can serve social systems well.

Society has a vested interest in keeping us divided and serving the good of society rather than our own desires. On one level that is a good thing. We really don't want little boys killing their fathers and having sex with their mothers. But we also don't want to suppress the inner awareness of who we are, what we really want and what we really feel. It is in the social interest of nations to keep us sending our boys and girls to war and stuffing our emotional resistance. It is in the social interest of a police state to keep order by repression that offends our inner sense of justice.

Let me illustrate how this works with a personal example. I have an intuition that during my infancy, I felt ecstatic states of love in my mother's arms. I hope many of you did too! Perhaps my religious quest is just trying to return to those undifferentiated moments of her loving embrace. I suspect the arrival of my sister weeks before my second birthday robbed me of her undivided attention.

I want you to know that I have no blame or judgment of my mother. She did the best they could to raise me, just like most parents do. But the gap between my need for attention and her ability to respond have left emotional wounds that are my responsibility now to heal. I

grew up with a big intimacy hole in my heart.

As I grew up, I ached for intimacy and looked beyond my family to get it, by being very social and outgoing, seeking approval, comfort and care. Since my family liked to communicate rationally about things, I buried my feelings as best I could and learned to operate out of my head to get my connection needs met. I'm pretty smart so I worked really hard at it. It wasn't until much later in my life that I discovered it is next to impossible to get my emotional needs met through the intellect.

In my 20's, The one place I did discover I could get my soul's hunger for connection met was in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Being a member satisfied it a little. Becoming a minister satisfied it a lot. You may notice that I really enjoy being with people and can be social for many hours at a time without getting tired. Now let me say that this isn't a really good reason to become a minister. People often have self-serving reasons for going into the ministry. In the best case, they stay in ministry to serve others rather than be served. But without becoming familiar with my soul, I couldn't have made that transition.

You see, it isn't appropriate for me to use the congregation to get my intimacy needs met. I'm here to serve you. Thankfully I'm married. That is where I get those needs met. And with my ministerial colleagues. And my personal friends. And yet a fortuitous byproduct of healing my separation from my soul is an even better facility for being with people in greater emotional depth. It is a healing process I work on every day in my spiritual practice of mindfulness meditation.

So how do we unite ourselves and heal our separation from our souls? Look within. The soul isn't a fixed thing but a living process that is always moving and always changing. I find the trail to the soul is through solitude. Like Mary Oliver's poem, we must separate ourselves from others to begin to find what is happening inside. Yet solitude is not enough. We are quite likely to lose our way and become confused in our solitude. We also need community to help guide us to the soul. A special kind of community that heals rather than wounds. Parker Palmer advises:

Solitude is essential to personal integration: there are places in the landscapes of our lives where no one can accompany us. But because we are communal creatures who need each other's support—and because, left to our own devices, we have an endless capacity for self-absorption and self-deception—community is equally essential to rejoining soul and role.

The year long Wellspring program in which we're training facilitators this year is one such program designed to create a safe community for the shy soul to come forward, be known and appreciated. Another way that I have found very helpful to cultivate both solitude and community is mindfulness meditation practice in the context of a community doing that practice. Mindfulness meditation cultivates inner peace while pointing the attention to what

arises in the moment and seeing it for what it is without judgment. In that quiet, open space, the soul becomes sensible.

My sense of the soul is the truth of our present moment awareness in the flow of sensation, feeling and thoughts. The truth of this flow isn't good or bad, right or wrong, it is what it is. That inner truth is always changing and can't be fixed, as it arises spontaneously out of causes and conditions. But our *future* physical, emotional and mental state can be *dramatically* affected by what we do today. When we are unaware of that inner truth of what is happening inside our being, we react to the world *unconsciously* often in ways that harm ourselves and others. When we *know* what is going on inside us, we can *wisely choose* healthy, compassionate, life affirming actions ... and heal the division of the self.

The real mystery is: what *is* this soul quality of our being? Could it be the indwelling divine presence we all share? Could it be some kind of individual expression of the universal life force or oneness? Could it be some master biological organizing principle that drives the evolutionary process? The answer may be unknowable by human minds. But the *living process* the soul concept *points to is very real and extremely important*. The best way to start looking for that soul quality is by looking within and paying attention to feelings, sensations and thoughts and how they relate to each other.

I end with this poem titled "I am not I" by Juan Ramon Jimenez, translated by Robert Bly:

I am not I.

I am this one

Walking beside me whom I do not see,
Whom at times I manage to visit,
And whom at other times I forget;
The one who remains silent when I talk,
The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
The one who takes a walk where I am not,
The one who will remain standing when I die.