

Sermon and order of service The Mind's Eye

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Some notion of the soul has existed for humankind in almost all places and almost all religions and cultures for thousands of years.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the lions of our faith, lived and lectured and died within the living memory of the men and women who built this church. He, in all likelihood, shaped some of their notions of human nature and the infinite possibilities of humanity.

Sitting here, where our founders sat before you, what do you think? Does Emerson speak the truth to you? Does it resonate with you?

“From within or from behind,
a light shines through us upon things,
and makes us aware that we are nothing,
but the light is all.
We are but the facade of a temple
wherein all wisdom and all good abide.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson The Over Soul)

I have to point out that Emerson's idea about the soul was not the only notion to emerge from great Unitarians and Universalists. Our theologians have offered us a wide variety of ideas. They tend to fall into two camps; the soul as immaterial and the soul as material. A lot of this depends on what the theologians would believe to be truth themselves; and what they thought would convince you. Ralph Waldo Emerson's soul was a kind of transcendent, insubstantial force that infused all life and intention with the divine. Fifty years earlier, Joseph Priestley, that noted scientist, author and Unitarian minister, was convinced that the soul was real and substantial; a product of the very brain that could conceive of it. His kind spawned over a century of experiments weighing humans before and after death to prove that the fleeing soul lightened the body. I'm proud that Emerson and Priestley were both Unitarian ministers; and, if we could have gotten them in the same room, what a clash of titans that would have been!

Emerson speaks so passionately about the soul as if it is the answer to all of our questions about life and how we are all connected, and why our lives are so short but we matter anyway. It is as if all the material aspects of existence were servants of this limitless, purposeful and perfect energy. How can it not be so, he asks us? It explains so much. Emerson thinks and writes like the poet he is.

The British religious scholar Karen Armstrong once said we miss the essence of great religious figures unless we understand that our theology *should* be like poetry. When asked what she meant by that, she said “A poet spends a great deal of time listening to his unconscious, and slowly calling up a poem word by word, phrase by phrase, until something beautiful is brought forth into the world that changes people's perceptions. ... I think we should take as great a care when we write our theology as we would if we were writing such a poem ...” (*Speaking of Faith* by Krista Tippett, NY : Viking Penguin, © 2007, pp 43-44)

So, do his words resonate with you? Do you believe them? Or, do they make you feel uncomfortable? When's the last time you got into a conversation about the soul? “Pass the turkey stuffing, and, by-the-

way, how's your immortal soul coming along?" Since Emerson, it has become a bit of a taboo topic among liberal and progressive theologians. We are as obsessed with observable facts and reasonable arguments as the rest of our western and secular society. In that light, the matter of the soul seems almost irrelevant. Remember that unspoken principle from a certain generation: there shall be no woo-woo in UU.

Years ago, the Rev. Wayne Arnason was speaking before a ministers' study group and decided to deliver a short paper on the soul. He remembers: "As I finished reading my paper, I looked up and immediately felt like a parent who had brought an unruly child to a sedate, adults-only cocktail party. Some of my colleagues responded to me with outright hostility, shocked that another UU minister would disrupt their intellectual festivities with something as irrational as a soul. Others avoided conversing with me entirely, deciding to keep their distance in case this unpredictable concept that I had brought into the room might accidentally spill something unpleasant on their clean and neat world views. There were some people who were willing to engage with this soul who had tagged along with me into the room, but it was as if all they could say about it was: "Cute little concept you have there."

Why do you suppose Arnason did that; brought a little soul into the study group? It's too easy to speculate that the devil made him do it just to see what happened. But I think it is a reminder that we don't know everything – and we can't chart the course of our lives as if we do. Some of us chose to become Unitarian Universalists because we thought we preferred reason and choice and doubt. What we have to remember is that the things we doubt have changed. In the 1700 and 1800s, we may not have been too sure of miracles, but we didn't doubt that there was mystery. We didn't doubt that there were truths all around us that we could neither see nor comprehend, no matter how much we tried. There was a resurgence of age-old assumptions that there was a life around us that we could not see.

Priestley and Emerson, the Scientist and the Transcendentalist, even divided as they were by fifty years, were fascinated by things unseen. There was a time when things unseen crossed the border between the unknowable and the knowable. The western world discovered a natural universe that was invisible to the naked eye: air was composed of different gases and matter was constructed by atoms. The whole notion of what was real and solid and substantial had undergone a revolution. New revelations were offered by the microscope and the telescope and mathematics and physics – all reasonable and scientific. Things that were invisible to the naked eye were visible to the mind's eye and the imagination. A thing could be so because it made sense that it could be so – it explained so much. Even the supernatural could become natural if we would let it. Spiritualism flourished at the same time as science revealed the invisible. We assumed that if we just had the right organs of perception, or correct scientific instruments, we could see a world of the spirit at work. We still do. What do non-scientists call the Higgs boson, that tiny and unstable particle that we rely on to explain phenomena in particle physics? The god particle.

We live in a world of tension: we know it's impossible to know things for sure, but at the same time we want to – it would be such a relief, wouldn't it? Remember the story of the little girl who started Sunday School and decided to draw a picture of God? Her parent, ever correct and respectful said, "Honey, I'm not sure anyone knows exactly what God looks like." "They will after I'm done," the girl replied.

How would you imagine God, or what someone else imagines God? How would you imagine the soul, or what someone else imagines the soul? Would it make a difference to you if scientists could prove it existed? Would it be essential to you that everyone else agreed with you? We say not here in our house of faith. We avoid the idea of faith that says we have to be certain of everything, agree on

everything, and that our convictions should be in things unseen. But our avoidance robs us of something we need. We struggle not to part company with one another when we disagree. We are concerned that our answers will divide us; that one answer is true and the other false, that one answer is mature and the other immature, that one is real and the other misses the point entirely. So, we discourage debates and avoid answers as much as possible. But, you know, maybe it would be good to engage each other in a good, old-fashioned debate once in a while. Because it teaches us what we need to learn about truth and compassion.

If I were to choose four things that have the power to distinguish us, theologically speaking, from one another, they would be how we answer these questions:

How do we know what is important?

Is the thing that is most important the thing that is seen, or the thing that is unseen?

Is it more important to be sure about things, or to be unsure?

Does everything happen for a reason?

We cannot be glib about this; they are essential to the way we think and act with each other. What is more important, the essence of a thing or the nature of a thing? What is more important, what someone does or why someone does it? Is it more important to know that a star burns, or to know its elements and its temperature? Is there simply the amazing physical existence of matter and the forces that act upon it? Or is there some foundational source of power and grace that infuses each one of us and the world in which we live? When we listen to each other, and read each other's words, we learn to ask: why? Why is it so important that another believes something to be so? What did it fulfill, what did it explain, why was it so beautiful and captivating a notion? And then we can learn something about ourselves, why our ideas are fulfilling and captivating.

If we can talk about this with each other, we can learn something vital: it is more important to be compassionate than to be right.

Your notion of what is important, what can remain a mystery, what you can trust, must help you live a wise and compassionate life. That is the purpose of faith. To be able to live a wise and compassionate life. So, at the coffee table or the dinner table or the conference table, ask those deep and essential questions and celebrate the answers as what they are: genius and virtue and love.