



EXPLORATION

Care of the Soul

Readings



Photo by Engin Akyurt from Pixabay

1. *What is the Size of Your Soul?*

by Rev. Rob Hardies

Theologian Bernard Loomer asked..., “What is the size of your soul?” By which he meant, “What is your soul’s ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws more contradictions your way?”

Size was the defining concept in Loomer’s spirituality. He almost always wrote the word S-I-Z-E, with capital letters and dashes, to better convey the spaciousness that he intended by using the word. Loomer describes the concept this way: “By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.”

...Loomer showed me that spiritual growth isn’t about a vertical ascent to Heaven but about growth in every dimension at once. It’s spirituality in 3-D. Growth in spirit doesn’t measure one’s proximity to a God above, but rather

the spaciousness of one’s own soul—its volume, its capacity, its size. We need to grow souls that can encounter the other as a unique subject, not an object—in the words of Martin Buber, a “Thou,” not an “it”. We need souls that can take in the world in all its complexity and diversity, yet still maintain our integrity. And we need souls that can love and be in relationship with all of this complexity. Instead of fight or flight, we need a spiritual posture of embrace.

Source: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/23672.shtml>

2. *The Mystery of Me*

by Maria Popova

It’s so strange how we’re able to carry forward this *mystery* of personal identity even when our present selves are so different from our future selves and from our past selves most of all. I think a lot about this question..., “What is a person?” Am I the same person as my childhood self? Sure, we share the same body, but even that body is so different. It’s unrecognizably different. Our lives are so different. Our ideas and ideals are so different. ...This question of what it means to be human is always a question of elasticity of being. It’s never an arrival point....

But I want to ...[consider] ...this notion of ... fragments. ...We’re kind of a mashup of what we let into our lives. But at the same time, we live in a culture of dividedness. ...People being divided amongst themselves ...people being divided within themselves. Our language reflects that.... Consider the things that we encourage when we talk about a full life: wholeheartedness and mindfulness. ...Yet, we compartmentalize our experience.... We divide it into these fragments to be divided and conquered. ... Virginia Woolf ...says, “One can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes.” And she talks about the slipperiness of the soul and the delicacy and

complexity of the soul. ...The people most whole and most alive are always those unafraid and unashamed of the soul. And the soul is never an assemblage of fragments. It always is.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/programs/maria-popova-cartographer-of-meaning-in-a-digital-age-feb2019/>

3. *Spirit, Soul, and Self-Care*

by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

The theological theme of self-care would have us ponder, ingest, and heed the first Beatitude: “Blessed are they who are at home in the spirit.” Might we not begin to engage one another daily with the traditional Quaker greeting: “How goes it with thy Spirit?”

At core, the spiritual journey begins with our paying attention to our basic breathing. As Thích Nhất Hạnh says: “Breathing in, I calm my body and spirit. Breathing out, I smile.” Or I breathe in hope and love; I breathe out hurt and bitterness. As near as breathe itself is the Eternal. Moving in and out of us as we breathe is the One, the Holy, the Spirit.

...If the spirit has to do with making intuitive and transcendent connections, soul-work for me, along with the Jungians, has to do with raking the ashes, confronting the shadowed underbelly of existence where anger, anguish, and angst abound. It’s tempting to avoid dealing with our rage, our fear, and our sorrow, but any self-care regimen worth its weight must face squarely the uncomfortable regions of our netherworld.

...In healthy self-care our pesky fears are welcomed into the field of enhanced awareness. We begin to call our personal by their true names: be they sickness or doubt, vanished dreams or failing strength, broken bonds or joyless spells. We invite such creatures into our living quarters, our hearts, and our hours—if desirable, perhaps for a cup of tea in the late afternoon.

Source: *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Unitarian Universalism* by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle



4. *The Business of Saving Souls* by Rev. Suzanne Meyer

What are we doing here? What is our business? The answer is simple: we are in the business of saving souls. You heard me right: what we are about is saving souls.

Those of us who have had any brush with evangelical religion in our lives are apt to have an instantaneous negative reaction to that assertion. Soul-saving? Our business? No way! Not us!

I don't blame you, because, as one who has had a brush or two with evangelical religion, I likewise automatically flinch when I hear that phrase. And, make no mistake about it, I make no claim that we are in the business of rescuing men and women from some after-life spent in a literal place of torment called hell. I don't believe in such a literal place of torment, populated for all eternity by devils, demons, and the tortured souls of the dead. In fact, I don't make any claim to know what happens to us after the death of the body, or whether there is or is not something beyond this life.

But I do know that there are many kinds of private hells in which living men and women dwell every day. These are small personal hells of meaninglessness, banality, and loneliness. Hells of shame, hells of guilt, hells of loss, hells of failure. There are as many kinds of these small hells as there are people who live in them. And from some of those hells, we, as a church, can and do provide a kind of salvation, a release, or, at the very least, a respite. We are in the business of saving souls from those kinds of small, individual hells of despair and disappointment that drive people into exile and isolation, separated from community as well as from their own essential goodness.

Source: "We Are All About Saving Souls," Rev. Suzanne Meyer

5. *Impulse for Wholeness*

by Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

The impulse for wholeness is strong within us. This is challenging because our concept of wholeness seems to change as we move from one stage of life to the next. Further, we do get broken along the way by illness, the death of loved ones, and the other tragedies that touch our lives.

There are different ways to talk about wholeness. Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies said, "The purpose of life is to grow a soul." I believe that we are born incomplete, as if we have a hole in the soul that we spend a lifetime trying to heal. Sometimes, rather than working on the process of healing, we simply try to relieve the pain. This can lead to addiction and other behaviors that make achieving wholeness even more difficult, if not impossible.

In seeking wholeness, we are attempting to complete our life before death ends it. To paraphrase the poet May Sarton, we are called to create our self, and, as that task proceeds, we learn that change is always in the making, both inner and outer if we can be patient, if we can learn to trust ourselves.

Source: Touchstones

6. *Pivot to Soul Force* by

Reesheda Graham-Washington
and Shawn Casselberry

Soul force will require some realignment for many of us ...to fully embrace ourselves as light bearers who already have access to the source and force of love necessary to change ourselves and our world. Can you imagine ...if ...we have the same access to the power of soul force that Gandhi, King, and others throughout history demonstrated?
...

Soul force is deeply personal and deeply social. While it has been utilized by people of faith in specific social contexts, it is available to all people, in whatever location we find ourselves. Although soul force emanates from within, it doesn't stop until it manifests externally, creating personal, communal, and systemic change. Soul force is not limited to personal spiritual growth alone; it transforms communities and social systems. Soul force creates an

outboard rippling effect, changing us and changing the world simultaneously.

...Soul force is a deep conviction and trust that, in the words of Martin Luther King, "unarmed truth and unconditional love" are the most potent weapons for transformation in the world. It's an abiding faith that ...the universe bends toward the cause of justice. Soul force quickens our courage and silences our cynicism. As we align our lives with truth and love and justice, we align with a power greater than ourselves, a power that is unstoppable and enduring.

If a force this strong already lives within each of us, ...massive change is not really what is required for transformation. What if we only need to effectively harness that which we already possess? What if we only need to pivot?

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28382>

7. *Mystery: the Heart of Being Human* by Parker Palmer


For some of us, "soul" is an important word. But it's a word to be held lightly, in open hands. It points to the mystery at the heart of being human - a mystery known by many names whose true name no one knows.

Secular humanists call it "identity and integrity." Hasidic Jews call it "the spark of the divine in every being." Thomas Merton called it "true self." Quakers call it "the inner light." Buddhists call it, paradoxically, "Big Self" and "No-Self."

What you call it doesn't matter—but that you call it something matters a great deal. When we fail to name and celebrate the "being" in "human being," we are more likely to treat each other like objects, commodities, or machines. In an era of non-stop violence to the human self, we must lift up the fact that everyone has an inviolable, sacred core.

Here are "a few words on the soul" by Wislawa Szymborska, the gifted Polish poet who won the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Szymborska has a wonderful way of writing about elusive truths with a mix of gravitas and lightness that helps us see more deeply into what it means to be human.



The Soul should
always stand ajar...
Emily Dickinson

Image by Achim Scholty from Pixabay

A Few Words On The Soul by Wislawa
Szymborska

"We have a soul at times.
No one's got it non-stop,
for keeps.
Day after day,
year after year
may pass without it."

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-the-mystery-at-the-heart-of-being-human/>

Wisdom Story

The Mystic and the Scientist

One day a Religious Man approached a Mystic and asked, "Does God exist?" "Allow me to go within for an answer," the Mystic replied.

After meditating for quite some time, expanding her heart-consciousness to embrace the totality of existence, she answered, "I do not know what you mean by the word 'God,' but I do know that this world is more mysterious and more wonderful than I could ever imagine. I know that you and I are part of something so much larger than our own lives. Perhaps this 'something larger' is what you seek."

Then the Religious Man approached a Scientist. "Does God exist?" he asked. "Let me think," the Scientist replied.

And so she thought. She thought about the vastness of the universe—156 billion light-years, or something like 936 billion trillion miles, in diameter—and the almost immeasurable smallness of a quark. She thought of how the energy of the Big Bang fuels the beating of her own heart. And then she answered, "I do not know what you mean by the word 'God,' but I do know that this world is more mysterious and more wonderful than I could ever imagine. I know that you and I are part of something so much larger than our own lives. Perhaps this 'something larger' is what you seek."

The Religious Man then thought to himself. He thought of what he knows and what he does not know. He thought about how he knows what he knows, and how he knows he doesn't know what he doesn't know. He thought about his experience of the world and how it is but one tiny, infinitesimal fraction of all experience. He thought about his dependence on forces larger than himself, and he thought about the interdependence of all existence. He experienced wonder and pondered mystery. And then he knew—he knew in his soul the truth of what the Mystic and the Scientist said—that he is part of something so much larger than his own life.

And then, only then, did he think about what he'd call it.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/practice/workshop5/59475.shtml>

Snippets

"We may choose to enter the wilderness like the people of Yahweh, to escape bondage, or, like Henry David Thoreau, to 'live deliberately.' Or we may, like Jesus, be driven there without much choice. Once there, even our markers of time and space collapse, for this wilderness is not in space or time, but is the boundless territory of the soul. Wilderness is a part of every person's soul-journey." *Rev. Sarah York*

"Not every story has a happy ending, ... but the discoveries of science, the teachings of the heart, and the revelations of the soul all assure us that no human being is ever beyond redemption. The possibility of renewal exists so long as life exists. How to support that possibility in others and in ourselves is the ultimate question." *Gabor Maté*

"...James Baldwin invokes the rhythms of jazz, the resilience of people hard oppressed, and the freshness of new life he sees in children. The question remains, he asked, "What to do with all this beauty?"

This question challenges me more than any other in life. How do I live in a way that keeps faith with beauty—with the beauty I have known, the beauty of

all people everywhere, the beauty of the earth? How do I resist the violence that tears us from one another and the earth? When the violence goes deep into the core of the human soul, as it has mine, how is the heart restored?
Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

"One benefit of travel is the opportunity to see the world's soul in the concrete and discover the many ways life can be lived out. If we reduce travel to transportation, we withhold soul from our movements, and then, for all our moving around and getting from place to place, the soul goes unfed. Travel is a profound mystery, but for it to speak to the soul, we have to go about it with care, especially inviting the soul to share in the experience." *Thomas Moore*

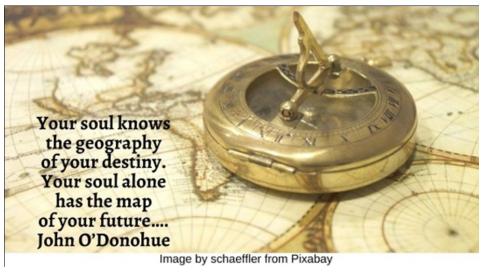
"I have come to be suspicious of any religion or form of therapy that focuses exclusively on cultivating the interior life or saving the soul and that does not include a celebration of the senses, an ecological vision, and a concern for social justice. We can aspire to care for and transform this world only if we trust that spirit is incarnate in flesh and dirt. This world is our home. We are in the right place." *Sam Keen*

Here's the deal. The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul's healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through.

And yet, we have something better: our gift of self in the form of personal presence and attention, the kind that invites the other's soul to show up. As Mary Oliver has written, "This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness."

Parker Palmer

"...It is important to recognize that the nature of the soul defies precise cartography. If maps of the soul eliminate mystery, they also eliminate the soul.



We ...need to be prepared, therefore, for definitions that may seem vague and boundaries that appear hazy. As we shall discover, spirit and mystery are closely connected. While not everything that is mysterious is spiritual, the genuinely spiritual always retains an element of mystery. Maps of the soul should not, therefore, be expected to eliminate the mystery that is inevitably a part of the psychospiritual nature of persons.

“Our journey toward an understanding of the soul and its care will begin with an exploration of the inner world of persons.” *David Benner*

“My grandfather died when I was seven years old. I had never lived in a world without him in it. And it was hard for me. He called me by my special name, nshyme-le, meaning beloved little soul. There was no one left to call me that any more. At first, I was afraid that without him to see me and tell God who I was I might disappear. But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his yes and that once blessed, we are blessed, forever.”

Rachel Naomi Remen

“Ultimately, one of the best ways to take care of our souls is to build a society that supports rather than undermines our highest moral and spiritual intuitions and inclinations. Yet, building that society can never be divided from the daily practices through which we live out our ethical and spiritual lives, both in the way we treat others around us, and in the way we nourish the ... [divine] within us.” *Michael Lerner*

“As we practice our daily arts, if only in the composing of a heart-felt letter, we are unearthing the eternal from within ordinary time, engaging in the special qualities, themes, and circumstances of the soul. Soul thrives as we jot down a

thought in our diary or note a dream, and give body to a slight influx of eternity. Our notebooks then truly become our own private gospels and sutras, our holy books, and our simple paintings truly serve as icons, every bit as significant in the work of our own soul as the wonderful icons of the Eastern churches are for their congregations.”

Thomas Moore

Questions

While there are many different ideas about the soul, for the purpose of this Exploration and the following questions consider the soul as being the essence of who you are as an individual, the essence of the world, and the essence of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

1. In reading #1, Rob Hardies writes about Bernard Loomer’s concept of the S-I-Z-E of one’s soul “Growth in spirit doesn’t measure one’s proximity to a God above, but rather the spaciousness of one’s own soul—its volume, its capacity, its size.” Loomer asks, “What is the size of your soul? What is your soul’s ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws more contradictions your way?” What is the soul to you? How would you answer his questions?” Some use the term great souls to refer to exceptional people. Who would you consider to be a great soul? Why?
2. In reading #2, Maria Popova writes that we live in a culture of dividedness, that we are fragmented despite the search for wholeheartedness and mindfulness. Do you agree with her? Why or why not? She quotes Virginia Woolf: “One can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes.” This mystery of the soul, aligns with Popova’s interest in the mystery of personal identity. In what ways are you a mystery to others? To yourself? In what ways are others a mystery to you?
3. In reading #3, the Rev. Tom Owen-Towle, focuses on self-care as soul-work. He says that part of it is the deep work that “has to do with raking the ashes, confronting the shadowed underbelly of existence where anger, anguish, and angst abound.” What are examples of this where self-care would be especially challenging? Owen-Towle includes “sickness or doubt, vanished dreams or failing strength, broken bonds or joyless spells.” When have you found self-care especially difficult? Why? How do these realities make it difficult to care for someone else who is struggling with life?
4. In reading #4, the Rev. Suzanne Meyer suggests that the answer to the question immediately above is a concern of our religious tradition. She writes that Unitarian Universalism is in the business of saving souls. By this, she means salvation from the various hells that people experience in this life, including “small personal hells of meaninglessness, banality, and loneliness. Hells of shame, hells of guilt, hells of loss, hells of failure.” What are examples of some of these hells? Why are they so difficult for people to escape from? What are some of the ways that our congregations can offer care to people who are struggling with such hells?
5. In reading #5, the Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland writes, “I believe that we are born incomplete, as if we have a hole in the soul that we spend a lifetime trying to heal. Sometimes, rather than working on the process of healing, we simply try to relieve the pain. This can lead to addiction and other behaviors that make achieving wholeness even more difficult, if not impossible.” Why do some have the feeling that they are incomplete? What are some unhealthy ways of striving for wholeness? What are some healthy ways of striving for it?
6. In reading #6, Reesheda Graham-Washington and Shawn Casselberry write that “Soul force is a deep conviction and trust that, in the words of Martin Luther King, ‘unarmed truth and unconditional love’ are the most potent weapons for transformation in the world.” Often, we tend to think of soul-force in terms

Once you've accepted your flaws, no one can use them against you. George R.R. Martin



of social movements and the pursuit of justice, but what role can soul-force play interpersonally? What examples are there in the political sphere? In what ways has the Black Lives Matter movement utilized soul-force? To what effect? How can our congregations help to cultivate soul-force?

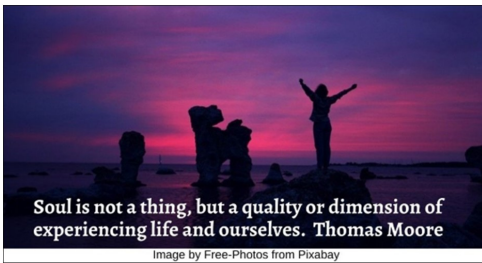
7. In reading #7, Parker Palmer writes, "In an era of non-stop violence to the human self, we must lift up the fact that everyone has an inviolable, sacred core." Many call this core the soul, but as Palmer points out, it goes by other names. How have people lost touch with this core in themselves and in others? What have been the consequences of forgetting or rejecting the idea of inherent worth and dignity, if not of self, then of the other? Is the poet, Szyborska correct when she writes, "We have a soul at times. / No one's got it non-stop, / for keeps." Perhaps, we don't lose our soul, we just lose contact with it. Still, what are the consequences of this loss of contact with one's soul? If someone was really connected with his or her soul, would they still commit violence? Why or why not?

The following questions are related to the Snippets

8. The Rev. A. Powell Davies suggested that life was an opportunity to grow a soul. The Rev. Sarah York adds, "Wilderness is a part of every person's soul-journey." Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. The Buddha wandered for six years before sitting beneath the Bodhi tree and achieving enlightenment. Tradition has it that he sat beneath the tree for 49 days. Thoreau went to the woods for two years to live deliberately. Gandhi led the Salt March with many thousands of Indians for

two months in 1930, walking 240 miles to protest the British monopoly on salt. He was arrested as a result and held in jail for almost a year. King, led the march from Selma to Montgomery, which was successful on the 3rd try: five days and fifty-four miles. The journey in the wilderness takes many different forms, as does every person's soul-journey. In the course of your life, when have you found yourself in a wilderness? What were the circumstances? How did the experience affect you? What did you learn from it?

9. Gabor Maté states that not every story has a happy ending. Still, he writes, "...the revelations of the soul all assure us that no human being is ever beyond redemption." For him, since renewal is always possible, the ultimate question is how we support that possibility. What are sources for you of renewal? How can we support others in their quest for renewal?
 10. The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, quotes an existential question asked by James Baldwin: "What do we do with all of this beauty?" Where do you see beauty in life? How do you use this beauty to enrich your life? How does beauty contribute to your wellbeing? To our collective wellbeing? Parker then asks, "When the violence goes deep into the core of the human soul, as it has mine, how is the heart restored?" Given all of the violence in the world, how can we restore our hearts?
 11. Thomas Moore writes that, "One benefit of travel is the opportunity to see the world's soul in the concrete and discover the many ways life can be lived out." What has travel meant to you? What trips were especially meaningful or transformational? Why? Moore adds, "Travel is a profound mystery, but for it to speak to the soul, we have to go about it with care, especially inviting the soul to share in the experience." To what degree are you open or closed to the experience of travel? To daily experience? While he doesn't use the word, Moore is
- talking about mindfulness. How does mindfulness open the soul to experience?
12. While Suzanne Meyer (Reading #4) suggested that we focus on saving souls, Sam Keen has broader concerns. He is "suspicious of any religion or form of therapy that focuses exclusively on cultivating the interior life or saving the soul and that does not include a celebration of the senses, an ecological vision, and a concern for social justice." Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
 13. Parker Palmer writes that, "The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed—to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is." Does his observation apply to you, to what you want from others? Why or why not? Is this truer when you are distressed or suffering? In terms of helping to heal another, Parker writes that we have the "gift of self in the form of personal presence and attention, the kind that invites the other's soul to show up." He is writing about the importance of companionship and caring. How has someone's quiet presence and attentiveness been of comfort to you in difficult times? As Mary Oliver has written, "This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness." Do you agree? Why or why not?
 14. David Benner writes, "...It is important to recognize that the nature of the soul defies precise cartography. If maps of the soul eliminate mystery, they also eliminate the soul." What maps do you use in navigating life? Do they include mystery? Why or why not?
 15. Rachel Naomi Remen writes that her grandfather called her "*nshyme-le*, meaning beloved little soul." After his death, she was in grief and distressed, yet writes, "But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his yes and that once blessed, we are blessed, forever." She is writing about a



communion of two souls. Have you ever experienced this kind of closeness with another? What did it mean to you? Remen was also writing about the process of grief, about how a loved one's physical presence becomes a spiritual presence over time. What has been your experience of grief? What helped with your grief? With your healing?

16. Michael Lerner writes, "Ultimately, one of the best ways to take care of our souls is to build a society that supports rather than undermines our highest moral and spiritual intuitions and inclinations." Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Are there ways in which our congregations can help build this kind of society? Why or why not? To what extent does society undermine "our highest moral and spiritual intuitions and inclinations?" Support them?
17. Thomas Moore extols what he calls "our daily arts." He focuses on writing a letter or journaling, yet the daily arts are spiritual practices that are quite extensive. In practicing these, we are, writes Moore, "unearthing the eternal from within ordinary time." Through these practices, writes Moore, our "soul thrives." What spiritual practices bring you solace? How do they help you to thrive?

