

Soulcraft – Opening to Our Inner Center

A Sermon by The Rev. Makenah Elizabeth Morriss

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*“Whoever you are...the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.”* Mary Oliver

These words of poetry by Mary Oliver move deeply into our being and touch us with their invitation to profound authenticity, their encouragement to dive deeply into the nature of our soul.

What do you think the soul is? Do you think the soul can grow? Have you ever witnessed that in yourself or someone else?

I have found that it is in using images or experience of nature that our “soul” is most often touched and ignited with hope, wonder, and creativity. I believe our souls are very connected with nature – there is wildness deep within each of us that yearns for the chance to blossom and bloom in our own unique and creative ways as part of the sacred dance of life.

Wyoming is thus for me a real “soul” place – a land so beautiful and grand that it beckons constantly to us – to go out, to stand, walk, hike, run, play, ride in it, to be with others and to go alone, to be in the mountains, in the forests, on the open plains, to see the mule deer and the fox, the elk and the bobcat, the moose and the mountain lion and to experience a more direct connection with the life force all around us. There is both a ruggedness and a gracefulness to this country which inspires the soul.

Winston Abbott, another poet, once wrote “it is the sense of mystery that gives to life its majesty – for it comes—it goes—it is the song of the bird upon the branch—it is the silence when the song is gone.”

Every one of us here this morning, holds in our hearts and memories such experiences of mystery and majesty that nurtured our souls. And that is because our souls and nature are in truth entwined. Our souls are of the stuff of nature – our beings vibrate with the energy and elements and atoms shared with all parts of creation on Planet Earth. We experience both a sense of oneness and at the same time an awareness of our uniqueness and individuality.

And so as you listen to my words this morning, you may also want to be holding in your mind’s eye and soul’s experience, a time or place of soul connection for you. This sermon is to affirm and strengthen your sense and appreciation of soul, its link with the deep mysteries of nature, its inherent sense of ultimate creativity.

Bill Plotkin is a Ph.D. psychologist whose own path initially was directed toward a high level career in academia but whose soul caused him to find and follow a road less traveled. He is a self-defined depth psychologist, eco-therapist, and wilderness guide.

Using his own life experience as a place of departure, he embarked upon a journey in which he enables others to explore their inner core, their “souls,” through experiences in and related to nature. He has developed a Center which sponsors programs and vision quests to help adults of all ages look at who they truly are and how they want to bring their own unique gifts to blossom for the fullness and health of the world. His programs focus on helping folks descend into their inner depth and mystery to clarify their connection and intuitive understandings of nature and the life force and thus to claim more fully who they truly are.

Bill deals a great deal with three specific terms – ego, soul and spirit. I want to share his definitions of these terms with you – not for you to adopt, but instead for you to hold in your mind and heart and to reflect upon. You can put them up next to your own definitions and see similarities and differences. There may be some new insights which occur for you even if you do not find his full definitions useful.

“Ego,” Plotkin defines as “a person’s everyday, conscious self while in its normal state of being.” Ego is a very necessary feature of being human. If all goes well in our early development, a healthy ego appears around age four, then shape-shifts, time and again, as it matures and sees us through a lifetime of adventures. At its inception, the ego is naturally narcissistic, but if it develops wholesomely, guided by both soul and nature, it identifies with an increasingly wider slice of life. (Plotkin, *Soulcraft*, p.39)

“Ego growth takes time and effort and indeed it is never finished, no matter how much we may also be developing transpersonally. In our contemporary society, when ego growth falters or stalls, we seek help from psychotherapy and related disciplines such as social work, personal coaching, art and movement therapies and bodywork.” (Plotkin, p. 32)

Plotkin defines “soul” as “the vital, mysterious and wild core of our individual selves, an essence unique to each person, qualities found in layers of the self much deeper than our personalities.” (Plotkin, p.25)

“The concept of soul embraces the essence of our particular individuality. This individuality reflects our unique and deepest personal characteristics, the core and enduring qualities that define our personhood, the true self, the “real me.” Soul is what is most wild and natural within us.

Ultimately, each soul exists as an agent for spirit

“Spirit” Plotkin defines as “the single, great, and eternal mystery that permeates and animates everything in the universe and yet transcends all.”

“In contrast to soul, the concept of spirit points to what all people, all things, have in common, our shared membership in a single cosmos, each of us a facet of the One Being that contains all. Spirit both transcends all things and is immanent in all things. Spirit is both something majestic ‘out there,’ something removed from ordinary life; but spirit is simultaneously that which infuses all and everything – the land, the air, the animals, all peoples, our human creations, our own bodies and

selves.

“Soul embraces and calls us toward what is most unique in us. Spirit encompasses and draws us toward what is most universal and shared.” (Plotkin, p.25)

Ego might be said to be the agent or vehicle of soul and soul to be the agent of spirit – at once unique and connected with all.

As Plotkin writes, “We long to discover the secrets and mysteries of our individual lives, to find our unique way of belonging to this world, to recover the never-before-seen treasure we were born to bring to our communities. To carry this treasure to others is half of our spiritual longing. The other half is to experience our oneness with the universe, with all of creation. While embracing and integrating both halves of the spiritual, “soulcraft” work focuses on the first: our yearning for individual personal meaning and a way to contribute to life, a yearning that pulls us toward the heart of the world – down, that is into wild nature and into the dark earth of our deepest desirers.” (Plotkin, p.9)

If we are willing to gather our courage and journey forth with mindfulness and openness from our current place and space of being, our soul, “that small, bright, and indescribable wedge of freedom in our heart” will offer us a map. (David Whyte in *Soulcraft*, p.25)

“The soul is like an acorn. Just as the acorn gives instructions to the oak about how to grow and what to become, the human soul – a type of spiritual blueprint – carries an image or a vision that shows us how to grow, what gift we carry for others, the nature of our true life.” Unlike oaks, however, Plotkin points out, we humans are the one part of creation capable of ignoring or refusing the flowering of our souls. (Plotkin, p.26)

Our soul is our true nature. Our soul can also be thought of as our true place *in* nature. We have a unique ecological role, the way we are meant to serve and nurture the web of life, directly or through our role in society. At the level of soul, we each have a specific way of belonging to the biosphere as unique as any maple, moose or mountain.” (Plotkin, p.41)

Can you see yourself standing with that maple, moose or mountain – offering the gift of your creative and life-enhancing energy in this time and space of YOUR life?

Plotkin suggests that “Your soul is both of you and of the world. The world cannot be full until you become fully yourself. Your soul corresponds to a niche, a distinctive place in nature, like a vibrant space of shimmering potential waiting to be discovered, claimed...occupied. Your soul is *in* and *of* the world, like a whirlpool in a river, a wave in the ocean, or a branch of flame in a fire.” (Plotkin, p.42)

We look for those who would offer us affirmation and support on our journey of exploration. Sometimes family members may serve this role, other times it is close friends, and other times it may

be a community, a spiritual community like this one, which offers us courage and strength on our path of discovery.

The work of “soulcraft,” a term related to the growth and blossoming of our souls, begins with a realization that we may be filling our days with a thousand and one distractions to muffle the call of our inmost being. We begin to wonder if perhaps there is not more to life than just the next round of goals affirmed by our current Western culture -- the pursuit and advancement in a career, material possessions, physical safety, comfort, social and sexual relationships and economic position.” (Plotkin, p. 47)

We may feel drawn to the clarifying silence of meditation and within that experience we may gradually feel the soul seed deep within us begin to glow more brightly. We know we are no longer willing or able to continue our life the ways it has been.

Throughout the history of humankind and in all cultures, the soul journey is understood to include three stages.

First we need to loosen our beliefs about the world and the way we exist in it. This is called the separation or “severance” stage – a temporary or permanent separating either from our current role in the community or at work or more importantly from our way of understanding ourselves.

The second stage begins when we open ourselves to the mysterious possibilities – our destiny – that the soul seems to have in store for us. This is called the initiation phase and often involves times for deep reflection sometimes alone, sometimes with supportive others. We may make a special journey or “vision quest” in this phase to help ourselves open to new symbols and image of who we truly are.

The third stage occurs as we gather up these newly understood soul intentions and powers and learn to manifest them in the world. This is called the “incorporation” phase as we incorporate ourselves into a new role, or a new way of being in our community.

The initial phase is often experienced as a call to adventure or sometimes it is a significant life crisis when the roof caves in and suddenly major things in our life seem wrong. We need to look with new eyes and in new ways. We are at a point when we need to surrender what the poet Rilke termed the “summer house” of our personality, the worldview we began forming in the expansive growing season of adolescence and that has carried us through to this moment. This is the house we have been carefully building, furnishing and accessorizing at least since puberty.

As Plotkin says, “Now just as you are getting ready to enjoy the completed house, you hear a knock and the front door swings open. This knock on the door, the call to adventure, comes as soon as you have done enough work on your first personality that it is fully inhabitable.” (Plotkin, p. 51)

What we need to know is that the greatest value to be derived from building that first house comes from the building of it – not from the living of it.

“Leaving our summer house, however, does not mean we must betray our preexisting responsibilities. It doesn’t necessarily require us to quit our job, sell our house, leave our marriage or partnership, or end friendships...What leaving our summer house does mean is that we surrender what no longer supports our exploration of our deepest nature.

Now is the time to mindfully and with clarity look at which roles, relationships, activities and possessions get in the way of our deeper exploration. What we are being asked to do is to radically simplify our lives.

A group of us just completed a seven week adult course in “Voluntary Simplicity,” the goal of which was to help us sort out what aspects of our lives enhanced our deepest growth and sense of eco-integrity, and which did not. For myself, it was an exciting and profoundly helpful journey as our group reflected on, discussed, and struggled with a full range of aspects of 21st century lifestyle in our culture, a lifestyle which seems to encourage more living on the surface than diving deep.

Sometimes folks ask how to know when the knock at the door, the “call,” is for real and not some excuse for fleeing responsibilities.

Joseph Campbell, noted mythologist and teacher, suggests that there are four experiential qualities that accompany the call. First if it is a true call, you will know that responding to it is, in fact, not an avoidance of responsibility, but rather a facing of something difficult, something unknown and frightening that summons you. Far from looking to you like an opportunity for escape, a call feels more like a compelling need to walk into the mouth of a whale or out into the night and into a storm. (Plotkin, p. 57)

When I decided to pursue a career in professional religious leadership, this was exactly what I was feeling. I felt compelled to begin this new adventure but I was very unsure of where it was leading.

“Second, Campbell reminds us of a paradox at the heart of the call: this strange thing that calls to you somehow feels “profoundly familiar to the unconscious – though unknown, surprising and even frightening to the conscious personality.

“Third, you have an astonishing and inexplicable sense that the chapter of life you had been living is suddenly over, whether you wanted that ending or not, and often you have not.

“Fourth, the call is almost always unexpected, and unwanted. Yet you feel summoned by destiny, as if your own future has grabbed you by the collar and is tugging you forward, as if you had been volunteered by life to a task you hadn’t sought.

“And finally, like most encounters with the Great Mystery, a call to adventure is typically experienced as uncanny or numinous, suffused with the sacred (however you define and experience it).” (Plotkin, p. 57)

We go forth beyond the confines of our current life structures – we taste experiences which are very new to us and which we choose because they are leading us to a discovery of our deeper selves. We may choose to almost develop a chrysalis or cocoon as we nurture some new aspects of our selves

which are part of our soul's now unfolding blueprint.

We are learning what our sacred dance is not just our survival dance. We work on completing unfinished business from previous life stages. We leave behind any substances or activities which we may have used to avoid the tender places inside. We are learning to choose authenticity over social acceptance.

We are now on our journey to recover the image we were born with. And there are a whole array of practices and pathways to help us: dream-work, deep imagery; the discovery, fashioning and use of symbols and sacred objects; symbolic artwork; journal work; fasting; breath work; yoga disciplines; the way of council or sacred circle; the enactment of natural rituals and festivals; vision questing, understanding and responding to signs in nature; nature dialogue or talking across the species boundaries; animal tracking and other methods of sensitive and skillful nature observation; the telling and re-telling and study of myths and other sacred stories; storytelling of one's own personal journeys; sensitive listening and clear reflection upon others' stories; sacred, non-violent speech and meditative silence; soulful music, poetry and chanting.

As I read that list, did you perhaps notice that many of these you can experience within this religious community, our U.U. congregation? Yoga and meditation, earth-based rituals and celebrations, poetry and chanting, Chalice Circles which invite the telling of one's own personal journey and sensitive listening to others' life stories are just a few.

Most of all what we as a community of seekers offer is respect, acceptance and the affirmation to individual growth. This is a good place to work on your soul craft, the care and tending and cultivation of your soul.

As Unitarian Universalists, our willingness to dive deeply within to encourage the growth of our souls comes from the very roots of our liberal faith. "In the early 1800's, the Rev. William Ellery Channing, known as the "Father of American Unitarians," inspired a powerful spiritual reorientation in American religious thought. Channing pictured the soul as a seed. The soul, he insisted, can grow. It is a living thing, like a plant, and with careful nurturing it can be urged to develop its intrinsic potentiality into fullness.

"Religion, he said is not a matter of creed or doctrine, but an activity. It is a process of bringing the infinite potential in the 'divine seed,' the 'soul,' into 'ever-increasing reality in the moral and spiritual life.' This image is common today but expressed in the early 1800's as an alternative to the gloomy doctrine of Puritan Calvinism, which described humans as naturally depraved and corrupt in their core, it evoked lively often bitter theological battles." (Roy Phillips, *Letting Go*)

We gather to hold the sacred space of growth for each other. We gather to encourage each other to become our most fully authentic selves. We are a people committed to questioning for the sake of finding new perspectives and new truths.

I want to close with these words of Bill Plotkin, "Each of us is born with a treasure, an essence, a seed of quiescent potential, secreted for safekeeping in the center of our being. This

treasure, this personal quality, power, talent, or gift is ours to develop, embody, and offer to our communities through acts of service – our contributions of all sizes to a more diverse, vital and evolved world. Our personal destiny is to become that treasure through our actions.” (Plotkin, p.39)

May we continue all our days to nurture and cultivate the life-affirming wildness, the creativity, the possibility that is our soul.

So may it be.