

Courting our Soul

A wise old monk was walking through town with one of the younger monks when a rabbit blurred by them at full speed.

“Watch this” the older monk said.

There was a commotion of barking and yelping as a pack of dogs ran by in hot pursuit of the rabbit.

“Keep watching,” the old monk instructed.

Another pack of dogs passed by after hearing the noise of the first pack.

“This is how the pursuit of soul proceeds,” said the older monk.

“I don’t get it” replied the younger monk.

“Keep watching” was all the older monk said.

A few moments later the second pack of dogs returned panting and looking for shade to nap in.

The older monk quipped “This pack gave up because they had neither sent nor sight of the rabbit. They were just going by hearsay from the first pack. Pursuit of our soul is much the same.”

All of us have a sense of our soul but we must learn to pay attention or we’ll lose our desire to pursue its reality long enough to be captured by it. Pursuit of soul is even harder because it is not something we can grasp or grab. At its simplest our soul is a way of being present from our deepest core of our being, it is an openness and receptivity.

On this most basic level we begin to experience our soul through our desiring. But this becomes complicated by our ego which rushes to fill in the desiring with something to desire, an object of our desires. Our desiring alerts us to the need of our soul to be filled with God’s loving energy. Desires (desiring an object) distracts us from the desiring and fills it in with something to desire. We fill our mind with image of new things to possess, relationships to pursue, scenarios which fit our agenda, or prestige and fame to fill our lives, as if these could fulfill our desiring.

This is the way our ego works. It directs us towards accomplishing tasks and pursuing goals. But our soul is about desiring, because it is basically an openness to being loved into existence and to responding in our own unique way of loving in the concreteness of our life. Our ego usually sets the agenda and limits for our desires without us knowing it. And yet our soul manages to squeeze around its edges.

Our soul expresses itself in very subtle ways that hang around the periphery of our awareness. No matter how busy we keep ourselves, no matter how much we accomplish and how much we possess, we find that none of this satisfies a deeper desiring. We feel like we're missing something essential. We experience the truth of the old adage: "Where there is too much something is missing." Now is the time to pay attention to what is missing.

When I was a child I had an insistent feeling that a part of me that seemed very real was being avoided by adults. I didn't have the words to express it and adults didn't seem to notice its absence in their lives. I thought that when I grew up I'd get the words. The feeling remains and now it has morphed into a need to get in touch with what is more true and more real than my thoughts or words. I have to express it. To tell the truth I feel driven to write this because I hope it will uncover the words and descriptions that will give form and keep me alert to this insistent need.

We may also sense a need to belong. It's like there is a place where we fit more snugly and meaningfully than anything we have found so far. It's an awareness that our life is given to us because we're wanted and needed with an intensity that nothing has been able to capture for us.

Our beliefs tell us that we belong to Trinity, but this is hearsay until we catch the scent for our self and pursue it. Part of the belonging comes from the camaraderie of running in a pack that is in hot pursuit of this scent. The pursuit bonds us. But I believe that the pursuit is meant to exhaust us so that when we can no longer run we'll find our selves snared by Love.

We may also become aware of a need to share life more intensely, to nurture life in all its forms (nature and people and beauty and woundedness). As we find our place of belonging, our place that is given to us from beyond us, beyond our aspirations and accomplishments, we will also be aware of a throbbing desire to give what has been given to us. In our adolescent years, and especially when we first fell in love, we may have felt, "I have so much love to give." At the time this felt noble but also a little self-serving. Now, however, we feel that it is being given to us and through us. We are certain that our love comes a deep source that must be given through the concreteness of our life.

All of this feels like it must burst through something in us. It's like we've been held captive, constrained from what is most real about ourselves. We're feeling the limits of our ego, which until now is the only way we've had to deal with out desiring. We feel the boundaries of our ego because we're becoming

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aware of the spaciousness, peace, compassion and generosity that is our soul. Just paying attention to the vague and subtle awareness happening within us begins to clear out the clutter and chatter our ego has amassed.

You could help your soul immensely just by trying to describe your own desire to be more. You might want to put it into your own words. What are you aware of that is straining at the boundaries of your life? What call to expand your soul is speaking through your desires? Where do you feel an emptiness that needs to be filled?

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

Courting our Soul

"I still haven't found what I'm looking for..." U2

We live much of our lives in wandering and wondering. We are driven by a restlessness. We wander looking for the place where we belong in a way that we have not yet felt. This is not a physical place but a deep feeling of familiarity and rootedness that makes us feel at home wherever we are physically. We sense that when we get there we will know immediately because we have found "our place" in this vast universe. "Our place" will have an intimately personal, familiar and comfortable feel. But right now we are still looking and all we can do is wander until we stumble into our place.

There are no maps to guide us and precious few companions. Much of Jesus' early sayings were meant to awaken us to our place in God's kingdom. However our ego has usurped his message and turned it into moralism. All that we have to rely on is our desire for belonging and the certain knowledge that we haven't found it yet.

Our wandering may also be driven by hunger. What we have learned to consume no longer satisfies us. At times we may feel ravenous, impelled by an aggressive need for something – but we're not quite sure what it is. And so we try whatever comes across our path. But the hunger remains.

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Or we may be at the point of feeling listless. We've wandered so long that there seems to be little point in continuing. Unfortunately it's all that we know and so we push ourselves a step further, read another book try another method, and try to pray more fervently.

We might even feel that our wandering is all that there is in this world. It's just what we do until we die. And hopefully our death will release us into our heavenly belonging. We're well aware that nothing we do or try seems to get us close to "our place" in this world.

On the other hand we might have had moments, nano seconds, brief eruptions of satisfaction and energy that give us hope. This might have happened when our life fell apart and we were left with nothing to rely on except that something was keeping us, something beyond us was living us. This might happen in moments of meditation, or nature or doing the dishes.

And it might have simply just happened. We didn't know why but it has given us hope that we are part of more and that "more" cares for us. And so we keep looking, hoping, praying, doing whatever we can think of doing. We've had a taste and we want "more." We are ready for more but the only option we have left is patience and a little humble helplessness.

This is a long way of saying that our wandering is a necessary vocation. At this time in our lives it is our spiritual calling. It is the only way we'll find the path that leads to our belonging. And no matter what road we walk they all lead to the soul place: one that is intimately ours and uniquely personal. It is a complete resolution of the disharmony, questioning and yearning that sent us off to wander and wonder.

This time of wandering is necessary for awakening to our soul. It is a way of leaving our conformity to social, cultural and institutional norms behind so that we can find the expanded awareness that is our soul. At first it may show itself in a rebelliousness and rejection of much of what we grew up with. But the questioning involved moves from externals to our internal situation. It is a surrendering of our point of view, a letting go of our judgments and expectations that are ours no matter how much they mirror our culture and upbringing. It is a questioning of our own person.

At the same time you can learn to love our self as you are: all of who we are. This is the growth of humble gratitude. These two qualities belong together. The ability to love comes from beyond our self.

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It is a gift of Trinity's unconditional love for us. Gratitude is our natural response to gifts that we cannot procure for our self.

This is humble because it is about becoming aware of and accepting our whole self: our shadow as well as our sacred radiance.

All of this grows from a willingness and dedication to attend to all that is true and real in our situation. We are learning to look beyond the interpretations of our point of view, to the more inclusive reality of our soul. In dropping our judgments and expectations we are open to receiving directly from reality. We are practicing living from the awareness of our soul rather than the simplistic judgments of our ego.

Let me leave you with this from David Whyte's poem, "What to Remember When Waking." It is from his book of poems, *The House of Belonging*: "What you can plan /is too small /

for you to live. / What you can live / wholeheartedly / will make plans / enough / for the vitality / hidden in your sleep.

You might also want to listen to Don McLean's (he is famous for the song "American Pie") song "Crossroads." Ken Sedlak CSsR – PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

Soul and Ego - an Overview

We are inching toward an understanding of soul that will help us be more sensitive to soul as our lives. Awakening to soul will help us to feel like we have a solid foundation in this world. We will know that we belong because we are intimately related to the Source of loving energy permeating all creation. At every moment we are being loved into existence by Trinity. The love of Trinity is the energy that gives us existence as well as the ability to be creatively present to and love one another. We are being loved into existence by Trinity as our unique and special way of being in this world, just as everyone else is. We will know ourselves as spectacularly ordinary, cherished for all of who we are, yet part of a shared humanity. We are a unique and special way of Trinity's love expressing itself in this universe and continuing to give itself in relationship. This is the experience of being soul, of being more than ego.

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To get a sense of our self as soul we begin with what we know, our self as ego. Understanding how our ego colors our awareness of our self can help us look beyond it to our experiences of soul which squeeze around ego's boundaries.

EGO. Our ego is our normal conscious self or personality. It is the way we experience our self and the world around us. It is not a thing in itself rather it is an energetic pattern of thinking about our self, as well as an interpretation of our memories, that we use to create our point of view. Our ego is more interested in our opinions and defending these opinions than it is in dealing with the full reality of our experience.

Having an ego as our consciousness of our self (an awareness of how we get along in our culture and focus our energy on necessary tasks) is the way we survive. Our ego is the habitual way we learn to function socially and culturally. This is how we learn to fit into our family and community, to gather food (cultivating, hunting or shopping for it) prepare meals, make a living, raise and educate children, provide shelter, begin relationships, take part in politics and in civil society. A healthy ego is skilled in imagination, feelings, intuition and sensing as well as thinking.

"Ego" is often used in a disparaging way – as in "He's got a big ego" or "She's on an ego trip." Spiritual writers often talk about the true self (soul) as if it were opposed to the ego (false self). Ego is taken to imply selfishness, self-righteousness, pride, rigidity, vanity and conceit. Much of this stems from the fact that ego creates a sense of control and ego-strength by comparing our self with and competing with everyone else. This creates a basic sense of separation and alienation from the rest of humanity. It blinds us to our basic unity and relatedness. And it uses negative judgments to keep everyone else in an inferior place. In our culture we are encouraged to see ourselves as isolated, competitive individuals who can only rely on our self and need to aggressively overcome any obstacle in our way. Other humans are seen mostly as objects that provide satisfaction or create dissatisfaction.

SOUL. Soul is harder to experience, mostly because our ego concentrates our consciousness on itself. We usually don't recognize the possibility of being soul until something happens to dislodge our ego from the center of our consciousness. This usually means a breakdown of our ego's ability to guide our life. When all that we've learned to live and survive no longer works we begin to realize that something greater is keeping us in existence and energizing our life.

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Soul is our self being loved into existence as an expression of Trinity. It is that place where we are most truly, freely our unique self as an expression of Trinity and as a contribution to the good of our community and Trinity's Universe.

Soul is much harder to describe and get a hold of in our life because it is a unique flow of energy that is greater than the ability of our mind to fully describe. It is the infinite and unconditional love of Trinity creating a unique pattern of relationship and creativity in this person that is me. Soul is a deeply intimate calling that knows my secret name, that knows me for all of who I am, am becoming, am being healed into, and am contributing in my uniqueness. This being loved into existence comes from the infinity of Trinity and continually responds to the intricacy and complexity of the universe in which "me" exists. It is our unique way of being loved into existence and being love for existence. We experience this as meaning, purpose, warm and energetic personal love which expresses itself in compassion, generosity, strength and belonging. We know that we belong to this universe, we are invited because of who we are, we are given from beyond our self, recognized in our unique contribution to the whole of creation. We are loved into loving.

As soul we experience our self as a person, a unique and special loving that is given into a specific environment that adds form, nature, culture and relationship or our self awareness. We can never truly grasp this with words. Instead we learn to trust our unknowing as our unique way of being loved from beyond our self. In this way we are a vessel, whose meaning is in its emptiness, whose reality as a gift given into existence is beyond words because it expresses the vastness of its Creator. This kind of unknowing gives us the basic freedom that makes us uniquely creative. We are an emptiness, a eternal receiving of and pouring out of Divine love.

In classical spirituality ego and soul are seen as lovers engaged in a mutually fulfilling marriage. Each provides the other with something essential and of ultimate value. Only the soul knows what the ego might find most fulfilling in live. Only the ego is capable of manifesting in the world the soul's desires.

HOW. We learn to experience our self as soul by learning to love our self for all of who we are at this given moment. The more we learn (this is a learning because it happens in relationship to Trinity's loving of us) to love our whole self the more we let go of judgments (the prevue of our ego) and receive our self from Trinity's loving. We learn to receive the truth and reality of who we are as a gift from beyond our self.