

# *Tending the Soul*

A Sermon Delivered on March 21, 2010  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky;  
there is one spectacle grander than the sky;  
that is the interior of the soul.”  
-- Victor Hugo*

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**Meditation:** by Mary Oliver a poem entitled “This World”

I would like to write a poem about the world that has in it  
nothing fancy.  
But it seems impossible.  
Whatever the subject, the morning sun  
glimmers it.  
The tulip feels the heat and flaps its petals open  
and becomes a star.  
The ants bore into the peony bud and there is a dark  
pinprick well of sweetness.  
As for the stones on the beach, forget it.  
Each one could be set in gold.  
So I tried with my eyes shut, but of course the birds  
were singing.  
And the aspen trees were shaking the sweetest music  
out of their leaves.  
And that was followed by, guess what, a momentous and  
beautiful silence  
as comes to all of us, in little earfuls, if we’re not too  
hurried to hear it.  
As for spiders, how the dew hangs in their webs  
even if they say nothing, or seem to say nothing.  
So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe they sing.  
So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe the stars sing too,  
and the ants, and the peonies, and the warm stones,  
so happy to be where they are, on the beach, instead of being  
locked up in gold.

**Reading:** by Thomas Moore from *Care of the Soul* (p. xi)

The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is “loss of soul.” When soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it....

It is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say a certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars - good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart.

**Reading:** an article from *The New York Times* entitled “Soul Has Weight, Physician Thinks” (March, 1907)

BOSTON, March 10 - That the human soul has a definite weight, which can be determined when it passes from the body is the belief of Dr. Duncan Macdougall, a reputable physician of Haverhill. He is at the head of a Research Society which for six years has been experimenting in this field. With him, he says, have been associated four other physicians.

Dr. Macdougall's object was to learn if the departure of the soul from the body was attended by any manifestation that could be recorded by any physical means. The chief means to which resort was made was the determination of the weight of a body before and after death.

The method followed was to place a dying patient in bed upon one of the platforms of a pair of scales made expressly for the experiments, and then to balance this weight by placing an equal weight in the opposite platform. These scales were constructed delicately enough to be sensitive to a weight of less than one-tenth of an ounce. In every case after death the platform opposite the one in which lay the subject of the test fell suddenly, Dr. Macdougall says. The Figures on the dial index indicated the diminishment in weight.

**Reading:** by Emily Dickinson a poem

The Brain-is wider than the Sky-  
For-put them side by side-  
The one the other will contain  
With ease-and You-beside-

The Brain is deeper than the sea-  
For-hold them-Blue to Blue-  
The one the other will absorb-  
As Sponges-Buckets-do-

The Brain is just the weight of God-  
For-Heft them-Pound for Pound-  
And they will differ-if they do-  
As Syllable from Sound-

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That must have been quite a day, when Dr. Duncan Mcdougall provided solid scientific evidence for the existence of the soul, with the help of a two-platform scale. In an interview the doctor explained: “The instant life ceased the opposite scale pan fell with a suddenness that was astonishing - as if something had been suddenly lifted from the body. Immediately all the usual deductions were made for physical loss of weight, and it was discovered that there was still a full ounce of weight unaccounted for.”

The experiment was repeated with another dying patient, and the doctor reported, the same thing happened. “The instant the heart ceased to beat there was the sudden and almost uncanny diminishment in weight.”

A total of six experiments were conducted, which included one woman. The five physicians attending determined that in each case, “a weight of from one-half to a full ounce departed from the body” at the moment of death.

Actually, the soul did not always vanish at exactly the moment of death. It left quickly from patients who were of ordinary temperament, neither particularly high-strung nor laid-back. There was, however, a man of larger physical build, with a “pronounced sluggish temperament.” When he died, the scales didn’t move. For a full minute nothing happened. The doctors looked at each other, silently shaking their heads, convinced the experiment had failed. And then suddenly the same thing occurred as in the other cases, and an ounce mysteriously disappeared.

Dr. Mcdougall explained it this way: “I believe that in this case, that of a phlegmatic man slow of thought and action, that the soul remained suspended in the body after death, during the minute that elapsed before it came to the consciousness of its freedom. There is no other way of accounting for it.”

Similar experiments were then conducted on mice, sheep and dogs. But the results were inconclusive. The weight of dogs remained unchanged. Sheep seemed to get heavier after death, for a few minutes, and then become lighter again.

Despite Dr. Mcdougall’s sense of certainty in March of 1907, the larger scientific community was not convinced. His methodology was sharply criticized. His results were largely thought to lack scientific merit.

However, the weight of souls Dr. Mcdougall measured, which was calculated to be an average of 21 grams, this idea has lingered in the public consciousness.

\* \* \*

A few weeks ago I watched a movie that addressed the metaphysical reality of the soul. The protagonist in the story, played by Paul Giamatti, is an actor in the midst of a life-crisis. He feels glum and depressed, and is unable to marshal whatever emotional or artistic resources he needs to perform in an off-Broadway production of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." Inwardly he is pained, he feels a heavy weight bearing down, and can't figure out what to do.

So, following up on an article he read in the New Yorker magazine, he visits a clinic that specializes in a surgical procedure that promises relief. With the help of a high-tech device that looks very much like an MRI machine, technicians are able to remove a patient's soul. The soul is placed inside a small glass jar, and for a nominal fee is kept in storage. This is just what the Giamatti does. Following the procedure, he is surprised to see his soul is not a luminous, ethereal entity, but looks just like an ordinary chickpea.

A chickpea weighs about an ounce.

\* \* \*

Thomas Moore tells us the great malady of our age, is that modern people have lost their souls. But he is not talking about a small object or a mysterious substance that has been abstracted or misplaced. When Moore speaks of the soul, he means something else. It is impossible to define precisely, but it has something to do with genuineness, with depth.

When we speak of the soul in this way, we are leaving the dry shores of science and entering the more fluid realm of poetry, religion and myth. The medical methods of psychology approach the world of the mind in terms of symptoms to be alleviated and illnesses to be cured. Those who speak of the soul, and the need to care for it, are less interested in curing, fixing, changing, or adjusting anything.

As a practicing psychotherapist, Moore says, he is often approached by people who want his help to get rid of certain tendencies of theirs. People ask him to help get rid of their feelings of inferiority, or their habit of smoking, or their unhappy marriage. If he did what they asked, he would be doing nothing all day, but taking things away from people. This is not his idea of being helpful. He doesn't want to eradicate parts of people's personality, which they consider problematic. He doesn't want to be an exterminator of psychological pests. Instead, his goal is to give people their problems back. He wants to help them embrace the difficult aspects of their lives, and think about them differently. He wants to help them see that their so-called problems may actually be essential aspects of who they are. Their so-called problems might have a hidden value they have been unable or unwilling to see.

So, for instance, Moore writes,

"A thirty-year-old woman comes to me for therapy and confesses, "I have a terrible time in relationships because I become too dependent. Help me be less dependent."

I am being asked to take some soul stuff away. I should go to my toolbox and take out a scalpel, extractor, and suction pump. Instead... I ask, "What is it you find difficult about dependence?"

"It makes me feel powerless. Besides, it isn't good to be too dependent. I should be my own person."

"How do you know when your dependency is too much?" I reply, still trying to speak for the soul's expression of dependency.

"When I don't feel good about myself."

"I wonder," I continue in the same direction, "if you could find a way to be dependent without feeling disempowered? After all, we all depend on each other every minute of the day."

And so the talk continues... (p. 6)

When we tend the soul, we are not trying to find some perfect, tranquil frame of mind. We are not trying to escape from all things difficult, in the hope of living an ideal and trouble-free existence. Rather than changing the essence of our lives, we try to be more sensitive to what our lives are trying to tell us.

As Moore puts it,

"We can cultivate, tend, enjoy, and participate in the things of the soul, but we can't outwit it or manage it or shape it to the designs of a willful ego... the act of entering into the mysteries of the soul, without sentimentality or pessimism, encourages life to blossom forth according to its own designs and with its own unpredictable beauty. Care of the soul is not solving the puzzle of life; quite the opposite, it is an appreciation of the paradoxical grandeur of what human life and culture can be." (p. xviii, xix)

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The soul reminds us that there is more to our lives than we know. There is more meaning than we can generally comprehend. It reminds us that even the dimension of our lives that are painful may be an integral part of what makes our lives worth living. That's what the poet Kahlil Gibran was getting at, when he wrote,

"Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears... The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain... When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." (*The Prophet*)

We are consumed by grief because of our love for those we have lost. If we could simply resolve to close our hearts, to cultivate a stoic indifference - then we would feel no pain, no disappointment, but our soul would suffer and shrink. When we feel inadequate, when we struggle with our limitations - it is because we know there is more within us that wants out. We know there are gifts within us, which we ourselves cannot grasp but only intuit.

The notion of soul challenges our narrow conception of ourselves. It widens our perspective of who we are, who we are meant to be. It broadens the horizon of our lives. It deepens our experience, allowing us to see connections too easily overlooked.

\* \* \*

James Hillman describes the soul not as a substance, but as a perspective. The main activity of the soul, he says, is to turn events into experiences. The soul sees how the countless moments of our lives constitute a meaningful whole.

Tending the soul means taking the time and space we need to let the events of our lives become experiences. It means allowing the deeper meaning to sink in, allowing a sense of wholeness to emerge.

Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way, he wrote: "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within [each of us] is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE... We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul." (*The Over-Soul*)

The soul within us and in the world around us will always exceed our understanding, Emerson says. "The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul."

The soul is deeper and larger.

"The Brain is wider than the Sky," Emily Dickinson writes. But she is not speaking of a width that can be measured in inches, feet or miles. She is speaking of an imagination that can travel farther than the farthest horizon. She is speaking about the soul. The soul is deeper than the deep blue sea. And if it has weight, it weighs - pound for pound, and ounce for ounce - no more and no less than God.

\* \* \*

Doctor Duncan Mcdougall used the tools of science to uncover the secrets of the soul. He thought he had succeeded. But his fellow scientists were not persuaded.

But I would like to believe he did accomplish something. He may not have created a solid scientific theory. Instead he succeeded in producing something like poetry. He succeeded in stretching our imagination, offering new images to help us envision what it is that animates us. He succeeded in mixing metaphor and material world, to hint at mysteries that will always elude our grasp and transcend our understanding.

There is something within us and around us - powerful and beautiful, mysterious and immeasurable. Mary Oliver calls it something fancy, that is inseparable from the world. Something in the tulip's petal, in spider's web moist with dew, in stars, and in the warm

stones on the beach. Something she hears in birdsong and the music of aspen's leaves, as well as in the silence that follows.

May we have eyes to see, and ears to hear  
The great soul within us and around us.  
May we never lose, but forever cherish,  
Our sense of a more soulful life.

Amen.