“Care of the Soul”

In the middle of the Montgomery bus boycott, one of the protesters (it may have been Rosa Parks) was asked how she felt about walking to work each day, instead of taking the segregated city transport. “My feet are tired,” she replied simply, “but my soul is rested.”

Even if we can’t precisely define the term “soul,” we know what she meant, because “soul” is at the core of our humanity. The word often refers to the element of the personality that survives death, but for me it means something more earthy. Soul is the meeting place of the sensuous and the sublime. It’s what whets our taste for justice, sharpens our appetite for beauty, our passion for order, our hunger for love. It’s soul that inspires great works of art that unveil the comedy and tragedy of our lives. When we speak of a soulful piece of music, we mean one that comes out of infinite depths of feeling. When we speak of the soul of a nation, we mean its capacity for heroism and visionary change. “The soul,” said psychologist Carl Jung, “is partly in eternity and partly in time.” Soul is present wherever our lives intersect the holy: in moments of intimacy, in flights of imagination, and in rituals that hallow the passing moments of our lives with lasting meaning.

In olden days, nurturing the soul was often the province of the village priest. Today the role has mostly shifted to therapists, psychiatrists and clinicians. But *Care of the Soul* is the title of a book by Jungian analyst Thomas Moore who suggests we need to recover the art of cultivating our spiritual resources. For the emotional ailments of our time–depression, anxiety, addiction and the rest–can best be understood as symptoms of a deeper malaise. That sickness was described succinctly by Jung over half a century ago in his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* where he asserted that people of our era suffer from neurosis because they have “no love, but only sexuality; no faith, because they are afraid to grope in the dark; no hope, because they are disillusioned by the world and by life; and no understanding because they fail to read the meaning of their own existence.” They suffer, in short, because they have lost touch with the vital sources of their own being. And nurturing those sources is less a matter of “getting your act together” or spending an hour on the analyst’s couch than of daily and ongoing attention to concerns of the spirit.

The story of one man’s search for a soul is told in Dan Wakefield’s autobiography, *Returning.* He relates being reared in a family that was like many others of the 1940's and 50's: middle-class, Protestant, and sexually repressed. As a child growing up in Indianapolis, he absorbed the parochial pieties of his surroundings, in Sunday School learning how to sing “What A Friend I Have in Jesus” and other hymns with words that were reassuring for a boy whose family was filled with unexpressed anger and parental conflict. But he abandoned his boyhood beliefs as a college student at Columbia where he encountered the broader world of New York City, with its bracing mixture of dialects and races, and learned in his classroom lectures that psychoanalysis had revealed religion to be merely a juvenile form of wish fulfillment.

“It seemed clear,” Wakefield recalled from his freshman course on Contemporary Civilization, “that psychiatry had replaced religion as the new, educated, scientific way of understanding the world, and though it didn’t have a God, it’s creator Sigmund Freud with his white beard looked enough like a representation of Him to seem a kind of stand-in figure for the deity in modern people’s imaginations (or at least in mine).”

Loss of faith was only part of a much larger illumination for the young English major, who was soon establishing his credentials as a writer and correspondent. He covered the civil rights movement for *The Nation.* His work on the Vietnam war won his a post as contributing editor for *The Atlantic.* But even after the publication of his first, best-selling novel, an exploration of a young man’s coming of age in a large, Midwestern city, there was an inward ache that neither binge-drinking, nor marijuana, nor LSD, nor five years in therapy seemed able to fill. By the time he reached mid life, he was a successful TV script writer living in Los Angeles, trapped in “a life [he says] I could only deal with sedated by wine, loud noise, moving images, and wired to electronic games that further distracted my fragmented attention from a growing sense of blank, nameless pain in the pit of my very being.”

“One balmy spring morning in Hollywood, a month or so before my forty-eight birthday, I woke up screaming,” Wakefield says. And that desperate cry marked a turning point in his life. For the first time since he was a boy scout a Camp Chank-tun-un-gi, he began once gain to take care of his body with regular exercise and a healthy diet. He left California and moved back East, to Boston, where he had spent time as a Neiman Fellow at Harvard, and where he’d grown to love the parade of seasons so dear to New Englanders. Most importantly, he started once again to attend church–something he had not done since his youth.

It was King’s Chapel, a Unitarian congregation in the heart of downtown. He’d chosen it from the Yellow Pages because its liberal theology seemed less primitive than that of some more orthodox denominations. Still, his first ventures on Sunday mornings were furtive, as though in worshiping he were committing an intellectual sin, that might tarnish him in the yes of his *Sunday Times* reading neighbors.

But to his astonishment, the congregants there were thoughtful, reflective people very much like himself. And as he became more involved in the life of the parish, he began to make additional discoveries. As a single person, without children, he found that a religious community could be a caring family. As a man who had hopscotched the world in his career as a writer, he learned the importance of connection to a place, a people and a history that could ground life and give it roots. As an individual who had existed from deadline to deadline, he recovered an appreciation for the natural rhythms of the year, the holidays and holydays that transformed the passing of time from a digital readout to a cycle of celebrations. And as a man who had driven himself to high achievement, he discovered that life could be more than a fluctuating series of wins and losses. It could also be understood as a pilgrimage in which success was less a destination than the quality of the journey itself.

“As fulfilling as it was for me to return to Boston and begin a new phase of life,” he says, “it did not make everything smooth. As the usual trials of life continued, I went to King’s Chapel not only for inspiration but for solace, a respite from the all too common affliction of the human condition, from broken furnaces to broken hearts, from bad dreams to flu and taxes.” “Going to church, even belong to it, did not solve life’s problems,” he concludes, “but it gave me a sense of living in a larger context, of being part of something great than what I could see through the tunnel vision of my personal concerns.”

Providing that larger context–a sacred ground–is what places like this meetinghouse are all about. They are not places of escape or retreat, nor do they offer any quick solutions to the problems of living. Instead they offer opportunities for reflection and soul-searching. “Care of the soul,” affirms Thomas Moore,” is a continuous process that concerns itself not so much with ‘fixing’ a central flaw as with attending to the small details of everyday life, as well as to major decisions and changes.” And although care of the soul can hardly be limited to Sunday morning, worship can be one of the ways we remind ourselves of the values that make life worth living throughout the week or throughout a lifetime.

There are many ways we care for the soul in our religious community. We care for it with music and silence and meditation that opens us to ineffable. We care for the soul in breaking bread, and in social action that draws us into relation with neighbors far and near. Those who arrange flowers in our sanctuary and tend to our ground minister to the soul’s need for color and beauty. We care for the spirit through commitments made and promises kept: when children are blessed, lovers united and dead honored and grieved.

And perhaps we care for it especially in this liberal congregation of ours, based as it is on the concept of covenant rather than of creed. For it’s not any statement of metaphysical belief that unites us here. What we share rather is a promise for how we relate to each other: in a network of equality and mutuality, with respect for the unique gifts that make us different and compassion for the common frailties that make us one. We are bound together, not by any dogma, but by our overlapping loyalties and resolves: to work for justice, to walk in peace, and to do our part to maintain the spiritual home that nurtures and sustains us all.

Like any human institution, faith communities can and do occasionally lose sight of their purpose. Religion can become trivialized. In a cartoon, Michael Doonesbury is talking with the minister who has founded a new spiritual community, the Little Church of Walden. “So how’d your new church get started, Rev.?” he asks. “Aerobics,” comes the answer. “I needed something to attract folks from the community,” the cleric explains. “The focus group suggested an aerobics class. It worked, so I added Yoga and Bingo, and then a few 12-Step programs, and then we opened a soup kitchen, which led to cooking lessons. Because I knew it, I had my own denomination.” “Wow,” marvels Michael. “So *that’s* how religion spreads.” This is not to say that yoga or

cooking classes are necessarily unrelated to care of the soul. But in all our endeavors, we need to keep sight of our real reason for being.

Growing a soul requires the work of a lifetime, and needs to the support of others engaged in a similar quest. “Our culture is in need of theological reflection that does not advocate a particular tradition, but tends the soul’s need for spiritual direction,” as Thomas Moore says. Unitarian Universalism can provide a shelter for the lost and searching souls who need a place of hospitality that will accept all travelers, a shelter that can embrace rather than run from the contradictions and complexities of our time. And if we cannot all become Great Souls (or what the Hindus call mahatmas), we can all be growing souls who teach and challenge and care for one another. We need, not a religion that we have outgrown, but one we can grow into, spacious and also evolving, to which we can return time and again. As we ponder our own individual journeys, and the power that lies in the depths that we share, we might ponder the words of Carl Jung, who wrote in a letter to Sigmund Freud, “What infinite rapture and wantonness lie dormant in our religion. We must bring to fruition its hymn of love.”