

Care of the Soul

Sermon by Roger Jones, Family Minister

Sunday, August 8, UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #126, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”; #162, “Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield”; #151, “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free.”

Reading: “[Some Questions You Might Ask](#),” by Mary Oliver.

Additional References:

Official [site](#) for Care of the Soul.

Thomas Moore’s [weblog](#) for *Psychology Today*.

Sermon

Last November, Doug and I traveled to Ottawa, Ontario, to be with a few hundred colleagues for a Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Ministers. What could lure two Californians to Canada in a cold and gray season? Well, the Convo happens only once in seven years. What would we miss if we skipped this one? Another big draw was our theme speaker, Dr. Thomas Moore, a psychologist who is the author of the longtime best selling book, *Care of the Soul*. Moore gave several lectures to the whole gathering of ministers, and he met every day with a smaller group of us in an ongoing workshop.

I signed up for his workshops. I needed some soul work.

What *is* the soul? Is it hard or soft? asks the poet Mary Oliver. Many think of it as the opposite of the body, or something that inhabits it, and goes on after the body’s death. In the western world this idea reflects a Greek philosophical influence on Christian theology. Christian history is filled with disputes about the soul’s final destination—whose soul is going where, and how to make sure we end up in a place we’d like to stay for a very long time.

That’s not what Dr. Thomas Moore worries about. As I understand him, the soul is the deep and vital essence of each person. The Greek term for it is *psyche*. Our soul is more than mind, body, and emotions, but it includes all of them. The Reverend A. Powell Davies was a minister who planted UU congregations all over the suburbs of Washington, DC in the 1940s and 50s, when he led the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington. In a famous quotation, Davies writes: “Life is just the chance to grow a soul.”^[1] Thomas Moore says your soul deserves to be cared for, to be tended like a garden. The soul can change; it can grow, or shrink up, or freeze. It needs our attention.

In Moore's daily workshop, I was ready to learn from this master, but he had no rigorous agenda for us, no plans for a soul overhaul, or even a tune up. He was curious about our lives and our roles as ministers, and curious to help us look at them. Yet it became clear that Moore is not in the business of solving problems or handing out answers.

Much of life, he said, is not something to be answered or fixed, but a mystery to be embraced. As a therapist, Moore has great interest in the mystery of the inner stuff of our lives. What gets in the way of exploring this mystery?

One thing, he said, is that we *think we know* more than we do, we think we have the answers. We North

Americans need to liberate ourselves, he said, from the need to be sure and from the urge to convince one another of the opinions and perspectives we hold. He reminded us that the Dalai Lama, like many Buddhist teachers, offers his teachings to all, but advises listeners to examine what he says. We can make the teachings our own, the Dalai Lama says, but if these words don't work for you, let them go.

Moore urged us to cultivate the soul with humility, with friendship, and with pleasure. We can practice humility in the face of the mysteries of the world and of our own

personalities. Moore calls this the embrace of holy ignorance. By this he means a learned ignorance: the more we discover, the more we realize how much we don't understand. Giving himself as an example, he talked about his own obstacles to going deeper and embracing the mystery of his own life. One obstacle has been his extensive education. Another, his upbringing in a religion he experienced as judgmental. The self-identity as an expert, and the ease of making judgments and pronouncements, get in the way of opening up to holy ignorance. Moore said if he were in charge of the world, every person would be granted a Ph.D. degree early in life. Then as we got older it would be *taken away* from us. Embracing holy ignorance means not staying certain, but renewing our curiosity.

To those who feel less than confident about the condition of our souls, those of us who feel like we have a mess inside, Moore told us: "If you don't have a *mess*, you can't do soul work." That's good news for people like me: there's plenty of messy material to explore. The 20th century psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung spoke of the messy part as the *shadow* side of one's personality. That's the

part of us that we don't like to present to the world. Maybe we try to repress or deny it. Maybe it's a part of us that we are not even aware of much of the time.

How do we approach what's in those shadows, how do we engage the mystery of our soul? What can we do? Well, first, we can sit with it.

Just be present, noticing what's in the shadow, recognizing the way the messiness looks and moves. In solitude, we greet the messiness, offer it hospitality, show it patience, and be kind to whatever shows up.

Moore said the most important thing that our soul needs is friendship. It needs the friendship of others, but it also needs our own. We need both community and solitude.

In the book *A Hidden Wholeness*, author Parker J. Palmer says the soul is like a wild animal. It is "tough, resilient, resourceful, ...and self-sufficient," he says. Yet the soul is also shy: "Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially if other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth... the wild creature ...

might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye—but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself."^[2]

We can find support in this practice, Palmer writes, by finding and forming "circles of trust." Palmer is a Quaker, and he describes a circle of trust as a small group of people drawn together for practices of listening and asking questions. Referring to his metaphor of the soul as a wild animal, he says that we need other people around "who know how to sit quietly 'in the woods' with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up. [Such relationships] are not pushy but patient [Palmer says], not confrontational but compassionate. [They reflect] an abiding faith in the reality of the *inner teacher* and in each person's capacity to learn from it."^[3]

Having soul friendships is not necessarily the same as having a soul mate. It need not be as frequent an experience as meeting with a counselor, therapist, spiritual director, or teacher, but it could be. Many people develop soul friendships in prayer circles and meditation groups. Countless people have been blessed to find soul friendship in 12-step groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous, where

they gather in solidarity with others in recovery from addictions or from dysfunctional patterns that can crush the soul.

What it takes for soul friendship ... is listening. In these times, true listening has become an unpracticed skill, almost a forgotten one. And being listened to and heard has become a gift for which so many of us hunger.

In this congregation we invite people to build connections through our Ministry Circles program and Adult Enrichment classes. We have a Spiritual Parenting group starting up next month. Our Lay Ministry volunteers are dedicated to and trained in the gift of listening. Also in this congregation, friendships develop over time when we work together on tasks or projects, when as adults we work with teenagers and children, and when we humbly open ourselves to learn from them as much or more than we teach them. We need not be of the same generation to give and receive soul-nurturing friendship. We need only to listen.

Just being *here*, together, in worship is a form of soul friendship, even though you don't know everyone else here. Showing up is an act of solidarity with one another, a show of support for everyone's spiritual

search, and an act of care for the souls of people we haven't met. We open ourselves to the laughter of others, the unexpected lump in our own throat, the chorus of a sigh or a moan when sad news is heard, the parade of humanity of all ages and stages of life.

Dr. William Ellery Channing was a 19th century minister, and the founder of Unitarianism in the United States. Channing said: "I am a member of the living family of all souls." When we gather for worship, or fellowship, or for community action and service, we do affirm this truth—our kinship with all souls.

In addition to humility, respect and friendship, Thomas Moore told us, we can cultivate the soul with the pleasures of ordinary life. Pay attention, for example, to the places we call home. What places are home for you? How do you treat them and think about them? How might you make use of them to tend to your soul's needs?

For me, one way to care for the soul at home has been to cut down on clutter, to unburden myself of stuff I don't use. *Doing this* is harder than talking about it. If you've been to my little office at the church, you know I have a hard time keeping things in order. It's been worse at home, in all

my various homes. I can get overwhelmed while facing the clutter: Where to start? What to let go of, and what to keep? How to decide what goes where? When will I know I'm done?

Yet I've been blessed by friends who are professional organizers—or those who *could* be professional organizers. Some have helped me to unpack after a move: showing me how to store things in a useful way, arrange my furniture, and hang things on the wall—how to make a place feel more like a home.

Some friends have helped me pack *before* moving. Some time ago, I was moving away after living many years in one place. A friend came to help me pack—and to purge what I could. This was her approach: She would open kitchen cabinets, and throw everything on the floor. Then I had to sort it all out: what would I give away, what would I throw away, and what would I keep? Would I really use what I wanted to keep? How? How often? After the kitchen, she opened my bedroom closet, and did the same: everything out of it, all at once. She was bringing me to my long-delayed moment of decision. It felt agonizing to make those choices, to face my motivations, and my avoidance, and my *stuff!* But she

stayed with me...not lecturing, only asking questions, watching and helping. Those hours of practical help for me were in fact a compassionate act of soul friendship.

One soul-tending practice that I manage to do nearly every day is to make my bed. For most of the years of my adult life I didn't bother making my bed in the morning. After all, I was going to go back to bed at the end of the day and would have to turn down the bed again. Why not save time? But six years ago, I began making it almost every morning. Now matter how cluttered the rest of my space, no matter how out of kilter the rest of my day might be, this ritual gives me the sense of a job well done. Making the bed makes a central place in my life—the place where I rest—a place of dignity and welcome.

Many folks go further, of course, by actually cleaning their homes, and putting everything away. But I've got a goal I know I can manage. But other people go further to make special areas in their living places. A colleague has installed in her home a statue of Kwan Yin, the goddess of compassion in Chinese Buddhism. Some people have altars or shrines in a corner, where they place tokens of spiritual values and

aspirations, pictures of special people and from important moments of their lives.

As I think about home and other places that matter to our souls, I think about people who become homeless, either briefly or for the long term. To be without a stable sense of home must be a soul-challenging experience. For this reason, when we feel called to give of our time or money to ease or end homelessness, we are responding to a soul-caring vocation, the holy calling of hospitality. Indeed, in most religious traditions the ancient practice of hospitality is affirmed as a high priority—hospitality not to friends alone, but to strangers. When *this* church hosts newly homeless people through Family Promise, as we will again two weeks from today, our volunteers take the time to make the guests' dining and social area as attractive and welcoming as possible, and their sleeping rooms clean and comfortable.

Moore reminded us that there are other ways to promote a sense of belonging, and welcome. For example, he said, "Even a chair in a sanctuary can give someone a sense of home." (I wanted to respond: "Well, you haven't sat in the chairs at our church," but I didn't.) But some

do find a home sitting in this room, and others find a sense of home various parts of the campus. Our church's community garden has welcomed people for a year and a half--those who seek a plot in which to garden and those who just want to wander and look around. Last week an elderly couple in the church had a couple of their friends meet them here for lunch at the picnic table in the garden.

Another example of how one can claim or feel a sense of home: When I was in seminary, a classmate went far away to a church in a small town for her ministerial internship, for only nine months. She wrote in their newsletter about a café in town where she frequently ate lunch. She sat down one day and the server said, "The regular?" and she said yes. She wrote: "I've never had a 'regular' before." She had never been in a place where she had become known as a regular, and her habits and preferences noticed and remembered. It was a home-place.

As with shelter, we need food to survive. But beyond the basics of survival, we can care for our souls by the choices we make about our food and the ways we gather with others to consume it. For example, as a therapist in meetings with families,

Thomas Moore asks them to tell how they eat as a family. Sadly, he often hears, “We don’t have time to eat together,” or “We don’t have time to cook together.” Whether it’s from the heavy pressures of work, other demands on our time, or just personal neglect, this trend is not good for our souls. Sitting together to eat is such a simple act. When we take the time for it, it can feed our souls. Better still, is joining with others to cook a meal together. This is why so many religious images and stories center around food, and around folks eating together.

Whether it’s family, friends, neighbors, or whole congregations, making and sharing food with one another is a form of soul-care. This is why I’m happy to announce and applaud the imminent arrival here in our church kitchen of a shiny new stainless steel stove with two ovens! We’ve also got a new deep freeze and refrigerator coming. If you gave money to this project, you may have thought it was just a practical thing. Well, think again, for these appliances have a sacred purpose: to feed body and soul, to draw people into community, to provide a gesture of home to all who come.

I invite you to think of one thing that you could add to your life

that might help you care a little bit better for your soul—one new practice, or a return to an old one. It doesn’t have to be too frequent, strenuous or permanent, but some regular practice: words, intentions, or actions that may nourish your soul. Some people read a new poem every day. Some read the same poem every day, and see what depth lives in it, or what it helps them find in their own depth. Around the world every day many read from sacred scriptures—even one passage a day: a psalm, a story, or a prayer. Perhaps you could write for five minutes a day—not an email but a journal entry for yourself. Perhaps you could choose one dish of food, or one piece of fruit, that feeds your soul beyond filling your stomach, and appreciate it. Perhaps you could take advantage of some of the opportunities to get to know other people in this congregation. That’s why we’re here—to promote connections and honor the mystery of life, and the mystery of our own lives. But it need not be here. You can tend your soul in any community institution, organization or group that invites people to be who they are. In all kinds of soul-nurturing, soul-nourishing communities, people share the joys of life, support one another in times of

struggle, and build a sense of belonging, together.

At the Ministers' Convocation, Thomas Moore urged us—and told us to urge you—to cultivate your souls with humility and respect, with pleasure, and with a friendly attitude of patience. If this advice comes across as urging self-indulgence or self-centeredness, it need not be.

For me, this is wise guidance for how we treat other people's lives as well as our own: Promoting the right to joy, pleasure, and well being for all.

Treating others with respect and kindness. Listening to one another's life experience with humility and without a rush to conclusions.

Showing patience... to one another as well as ourselves.

May we practice care for the soul—today and always—your soul, mine, everyone's. May we have the wisdom and the power to practice care for ourselves

and for every member of the living family of all souls. Amen.

[3] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Jossey-Bass (2004), p. 59.

[1] It's worth noting that in Hebrew, word for soul is *nephesh*. In English translations of the Jewish Bible this word appears as both soul and creature. It has an embodied quality—the soul is not separate from the body. A soul is a person, alive and breathing. *Nephesh* means, literally, a breathing creature.

[2] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Jossey-Bass (2004), p. 58.