

The Soul of This Church
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Does your church have a soul?
If it does, how would you describe it?

Those of us who attended the recent "Church of the Future" workshop were asked this question. It is a potent question to contemplate.

Some of us might get caught on the word "soul" itself. What is a soul? It is deeper than personality. It is what animates a being. Perhaps we can think of it as the essential qualities of a being, its core presence, its deepest reason for being.

I have a friend who is a specialist in wines. When she encounters a wine, she not only tastes it and observes its color and body, but she breathes in all of its subtle bouquet. She has an uncanny ability to store, inside herself, the memory of the soul of that wine. This is what enables her to judge between wines, to recommend them, and to differentiate the countless varieties and vintages. She has some strange capacity to recognize and remember the soul of a wine.

If we were a wine, what would she remember about us?

I have another friend of uncanny ability, who can walk into a space and feel what has happened there after the place has been vacated. She feels the echo of the people who inhabited that space, what they felt, what they loved and feared, what they expressed and suppressed, and how they treated each other. As a spiritual seeker, she often uses this sense to tell her the quality of the work being done in a community of faith and practice.

These are ways of sensing soul. And when we are asked, "What is the soul of your church?" we are using similar faculties. We are using our feeling, our intuition, our senses, to guide us in exploring the question: "What is the essence of our community? What are we about at the deepest level?"

A week ago, the folks who had attended the "Church of the Future" conference met to further explore the ideas we had encountered. We asked ourselves not what is the soul of this congregation, but what are, or should be, our central purposes as a community. In the course of that conversation, we began to recall all the old jokes about Unitarian Universalism that suggest that we have neither soul nor clarity of purpose. For example:

What do you get when you cross a UU and a Jehovah's Witness?
Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason.

Unitarianism is a cross between Episcopalianism and golf.

Or this one:

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a lightbulb?

We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a lightbulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that lightbulbs work for you, all the power to you. You are invited to write a poem or choreograph an interpretive dance about your personal relationship with your lightbulb.

Present it next month at our annual Lightbulb Sunday Service, in which we will explore a number of lightbulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, long-life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

There are many ironic, self-deprecating jokes about Unitarian Universalists, many of them made famous by Garrison Keillor of "A Prairie Home Companion," who loves to lampoon our tradition.

But what came up in our discussion the other evening was the increasing distaste that we felt for these jokes, that we no longer found them either funny or representative of who we are. We felt we ought to put those jokes out of business, make them obsolete.

It is possible to be a community of openness and tolerance and yet to also stand powerfully for core values and purposes? That is what we are called to do—to grow our soul and share that soul with others.

One of the conference attendees, Charlie Landraitis, shared his thoughts about how we can be both open and effective. He said,

"Being a community of like purpose brings out the best in us, and helps us to be a force in the larger world. We're not just about passive values, but also about trying to look at the world with clear eyes and help each other make decisions about what is right, what is the right thing to do. This is different from doctrinal churches—it's harder for us, as a seeking church, but it's a marvelous quality that we have in higher abundance than any other church I know."

One of the things I learned at this conference was this: The more inner clarity a faith community has about its reason for being—what it stands for, what its purpose and mission are—the more flexible, adaptive and creative it is able to be in expressing that purpose. On the other hand, the more diffuse, unclear, or uncertain a community is about its purpose and mission, the more attached it will be to its particular traditions and practices, because it is from these things—its habits—that it draws its sense of identity.

I know a church consultant who jokes about "The Seven Last Words of the Church": "But we've always done it that way!"

Theodore Parker Church is at a great advantage, in that this congregation is not fixed in the past in that way. There is no such attitude of "We've always done it that way," since this congregation has had to be extremely adaptive and resourceful and has undergone continuous change in its years of resurgence.

If I were describing the soul qualities of this church, I would indeed say something about its openness and sense of adventure. Our challenge, our task, is to focus.

A trapeze artist swings through the air holding onto one bar, and then must let go for a moment and fly, suspended in air, before grasping the next bar.

We are like that trapeze artist in mid-air. This congregation swung in a great arc holding to one bar. That bar was the fierce and intimate bond of a small community galvanized around the purpose of surviving, restoring its historic facility back to beauty, and becoming viable as a congregation.

That particular phase of work has, in many ways, been accomplished. The arc of that motion has reached its full extension. If we continue to hold onto that bar, to that identity, we will begin to swing backward.

And so, to the great credit this community, we have had the courage to let go, and now we are flying through the air, propelled by the forward arc of that past motion. That can be a strange, giddy feeling, a feeling of uncertainty, of anxiety, of suspension. But to achieve the next phase, the next arc, of our journey, we will need to reach out and take hold of a new bar.

So the question is: What will be the nature of that new bar that we are going to grasp?

We have an opportunity to shape our future based not upon habit, not on a past self-concept, but upon a vision of who we want to be and become, for one another and for the world outside these doors.

How do we want to live our life in community, and as individuals nourished by this community? How can we live from our soul? How can we best express the hope, the love, and the faith that is the essence of Unitarian Universalism?

Linda Underwood has written a poem about soulfulness:

All this talk of saving souls.
Souls weren't made for saving, like Sunday clothes,
that might give out at the seams with daily use.

They were made for wear:
They come with lifetime guarantees.
Don't save your soul.
Pour it out like rain on cracked, parched earth.
Give your soul away, or pass it like a candle flame.
Sing it out, or laugh it up the wind.

I will spend my soul,
Playing it out like sticky string into the world,
So that I can catch every last thing I touch.

In an essay called "The Church of Tomorrow" Thomas Bandy writes:

"People reach out to perform ministry because it is who they are—embedded in their work and leisure. People perform deeds of kindness, do daring feats of justice, and welcome strangers into their midst because it is who they are. It isn't because they are well-organized, but because they are motivated to live out a life of faith."

And the poet Rumi says, "When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you."

If our church has a collective soul, and we do things from that place because it is who we are, we will feel that river moving in us, and all who enter into this space will feel that life-giving river, flowing, and it will spill out of the doors as we leave to go about our daily lives, and it will water the ground of our lives, and the thirsty ground of our world, and it will help things to grow.

As we look toward the future, we will likely be exploring new programmatic ideas, and we will likely be making changes to the way we do things, in our

governance and committee structures and process, our leadership models, and our religious education, etc.

But the core purpose of our community ought to be expressed through our soulfulness. Let's not save our soul, but pour it out like water, let it flow like a river into the parched earth of lives that are in need. Let's give it away, pass it like a flame, hold it up like a lamp, laugh it into the wind, and play it out like sticky string into the world, so that it will transform all that it touches.

May it be so.