

Soul Pulse

Text: Psalm 42: 1-6a; Matthew 11: 28-30; Hebrews 6: 19-20

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

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An old friend called and asked me to take a walk with him. So bright and shining the next morning we met at McLean Game Refuge, a forest of trails and trees and ponds; and also his favorite place to sort and sift when he had something on his mind.

Our stroll began in silence just enjoying our surroundings. But gradually he got to the place of speaking. "You know I've been in a tumble since I lost my job last fall," he lamented. "It was a terrible blow to me."

"I thought it was the worst thing that could ever possibly happen to me. I was my work and my work was me. In fact more than I knew, I got caught up in the River of Expectation, my efforts ever increasing to keep up with the current and the pace."

"Then it was done. Over. Nothing left. I was completely bereft." Silence surrounded us again for a little while. He struggled to speak. "The truth is," he confided, "I was totally lost to my soul."

Nearly as a metaphor waiting, we sat down on the trunk a fallen tree. He half-smiled, "You have been there for me and I especially wanted you to tell you that I have found myself again. It has taken me some long hard work, but I got my soul back."

His experience is so completely his own. But the story of loosing our souls in life, of feeling bereft from our deepest self, of drifting from our moorings is one that is universal.

Travel back to ancient days of human understanding.¹ The Hebrews believed we were composed of multiple parts. "The flesh and bones of our bodies made the vessel. The organs were the seats of thought (the heart), emotion (the kidneys), intuition (gut)."

"The breath was what makes a person who they are. But the soul was different and more. It was the whole of the person, the unity of the body, organs and breath. It's not just some immaterial spiritual entity; it is you, all of you, your whole being or self."

The Hebrew word for this is *nephesh*. And *nephesh* holds this completeness at the core of human life. It goes all the way back to Genesis when God created humankind, and by the power of the *ruach* Yahweh – the breath of God - called us "living beings."

Well, that's what my friend feared he had lost forever: his whole being, his entire self, his *nephesh*. It's a frightening, even terrifying thing to feel. And it's why I was so glad for him that he got to the other side and claimed his recovery: "I got my soul back."

I recently learned of a research project called Soul Pulse.² It's based at the University of Connecticut and funded by the Templeton Foundation and seeks to quantify how and when people experience that "got my soul back" kind of felt-sense.

It's founded on the premise that our spiritual awareness depends on the kinds of daily activities we expose ourselves to; and it gathers data through a methodology known as smart-phone based experience sampling.

Quite simply, people are randomly asked what they are doing and how spiritually aware they feel. In responding they identify when a sense of connection with their soul seems to be occurring.

The database of these responses is growing daily and among the findings: spiritual awareness is highest in the morning; and the activities that increase it are prayer, meditation, cooking, worship, listening to music, reading and exercising.

Also discovered is that it is decreased by repetitive work-related tasks where there is little connection of effort to outcome. And, get this, playing video games! Also noted is that over-watching the news lowers spiritual awareness for everyone.

The techie spinoff of this is the development of an app called by the same name, "Soul Pulse", that encourages folks to mind their souls - eventually leading them to a more soul-centered life. As in my friend's relieved story, "I got my soul back."

It doesn't take long to find encouragement to mind our souls in the scriptures. And though it's not the best or most helpful strategy to cherry pick the passages that appeal to us here's a sampling that I favor.

Back in the day, God spoke to Jeremiah and said: "Stand, look and ask where the good way lies, as you walk in it you will find rest for your souls." And not too many pages later God also spoke to Ezekiel saying: "Know that all souls are mine."

In Deuteronomy, we are urged to: "Keep watch of our souls diligently." And the Psalms declare that: "God restores our souls" and therefore we ought "to bless the Lord, deep in soul, and forget not God's benefits."

Jesus, too, rings in as he invites us to "learn from me and you will find rest for your souls." In another instance, he sees the confusion of our priorities we struggle with and eye-to-eye tells a rich man "Fool, this night your soul is required of you."

And later in the New Testament, we read that: "Jesus is the shepherd and guardian of our souls. That he is a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls." And later again, in the third letter of John the prayer is offered that all will be well with our souls."

Let me pull it all together with a parting story. A bunch of us were in New Hampshire for a retreat. We gathered with the convener, an incredibly skilled leader, who asked us what was most on our minds.

The conversation ran the gamut: from demands of work to matters of family balance; from fears about health to uncertainty about changing economy; from anxiety to worry for our kids; from too much and too little and too many.

After a little while he spoke, gently, kindly, firmly. "I hear of all that seems to tug at you. But let me ask: when you set your schedule, when you order your priorities, when you make your calendar, do you every take the time to consult your soul?"

I knew he was speaking to all of us but he looked right at me. And friends, his question is the one that I have been holding as my own ever since. It's also one that I place for you as the edges of summer begin: "Do you ever take the time to consult your soul?"

It's honestly a perfect time to take the time, find the time, make the time, to wonder and to ask. As the pace slows some for a season, we, too might slow; and in so doing might just happen to find ourselves saying: "I got my soul back."

May it be so. May the wondering be full. And may we trust, come what may, that all will be well. All will be well. In God's time, all manner of things will be well. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ Google: "What is the Soul?" June 16, 2019 - with particular attention to biblical notions of soul.

² Cosey Cep. "Big Data for the Spirit" in The New Yorker, August 5, 2014. Also, Google "SoulPulse" for a variety of current reports and articles on the research.