

# *Living a Life of Soulfulness*

*Small Groups: December 2013*

Part of being a Unitarian Universalist is trying to understand and explain ancient concepts that get overlaid with thousands of years of religious doctrine. Soul is one of those words. The common understanding of soul usually has something to do with the belief that some part of our consciousness and being survives death and continues eternally. Within our congregation, I suspect, we have a lot of different opinions about that definition. However, *soulful* is a word that describes those things that touch our hearts that either feel full of emotion, or make us feel full of emotion. We talk about soulful music as music that we don't just hear, but we feel – music that engages our hearts and memories and feelings. To be soulful is to feel things deeply.

If this is the case, we can make a good case that Unitarian Universalists are pretty soulful. Even as we are curious, critical thinking questioners, we also put a primary value on how we live rather than on what we believe or think theologically. For us, religion has far more to do with what we value, how we treat others and the work of growing the quality of the deepest parts of our character. Our commitments to justice and desire for equity and fairness are born out of a feeling of compassion for all people and a reverence for life—this is a soulful way of viewing life.

But this can also get messy – and the depth of our emotions can run both ways – from elation to deep grief. The month of December is a time of joy for so many. But it can also be a time of sadness as we are reminded of relationships that are broken, as we miss loved ones who are not here to celebrate with us. Even physically, despite the overall warmth of Phoenix winters, we can miss the intensity of the summer sun. The longer nights and shorter days can affect our moods and bring on depression. And for some of us the constant call to be joyful at this time of year has the opposite effect, drawing our attention to where we ourselves are struggling and not feeling particularly jolly.

One of the most important reasons for our religious community is that it helps us engage this soulfulness, this emotional and relational quality of our lives. I find that this community helps to keep me hopeful and engaged with life and others. It is easy to become discouraged – and I know I fall short of my best self plenty of times. When this happens, this soulful community helps me keep my heart open and my spirit willing to keep growing, keep trying – and not only this but enjoying the journey of it. With its music, its fellowship, its challenge and its praise, I think it helps us all nurture those deep and soulful parts of our selves so that we might share this richness with others. May this season of holidays and holy days, of lights twinkling in the night and in our homes, nurture your spirit and bring you hope and joy.

Yours,  
Susan

# *Living the Theme: Experiencing Soulfulness*

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience soulfulness, and what living a life of soulfulness might mean. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to live soulfulness and what you learned from the practice.

## Exercise # 1 Watch and Reflect

Watch this video: Louie Schwartzberg: *Nature. Beauty. Gratitude.* [A Ted Talk]

[http://www.ted.com/talks/louie\\_schwartzberg\\_nature\\_beauty\\_gratitude.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/louie_schwartzberg_nature_beauty_gratitude.html)

Take a few minutes to describe how you feel, your emotional response to this video. Were there particular parts of the video, including the introduction, that made you feel connected, that invoked an emotional response? What had the most impact? Is there anything you want to do that you were inspired to do because of this video? Did you do anything differently because of this video?

## Exercise # 2 Feed Your Soul

Nourish your soul with a small bite of inspiration every day. It might be a poem, an affirmation, a painting, a quote or a photograph. Find one thing that inspires you. Choose a specific time each day when you are going to take a moment to savor this one beautiful, soul-stirring morsel. (From Katie Tallo, "Strengthen Your Inner Core" <http://goodlifezen.com/strengthen-your-inner-core-with-a-little-soul-training/> )

## Exercise # 3 Experience Being rather than Doing

Paul Pearsoll describes a practice he calls SAFE - Sit And Feel Everything. Set aside 10 minutes. Allow yourself to chill out. Seeking out constant stimulation from a million sources can be a soul sucker. Release yourself from the need to win, keep up, expand, learn, strive, and create all the time. Sometimes you need to simply be and have faith in life's unfolding. Rest nurtures your soul and readies you for much deeper soul training. Try to find 10 minutes a couple of times this month just to sit Better yet, try it every day.

## Exercise # 4 Know Thyself!

Take some time to figure out who you are. What makes you happy? What you're doing when you are happiest? What is good in your life right now? Write them down your answers or thoughts when you ask yourself these questions. Ask yourself why you don't do that/those things more often? Then do something about it: Remove barriers to doing more of what you know you want, to spending your time and energy differently, to spending your money differently. Define steps. Make a schedule. Plan the execution, execute the plan. Even a little step in the right direction can be fulfilling -- you are doing something for yourself.

## *Some Questions to Think and Talk About*

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into - and break open - your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. In Kahlil Gibran's *The Wanderer*, the dancer says, "The philosopher soul dwells within his head, the poets soul dwells within his heart, the singer's soul dwells about his throat, but the soul of the dancer abides in all her body." **Where does your soul dwell?**
2. Unitarian Universalist Minister A. Powell Davies said, "Life is a chance to grow a soul." **Have there been times in your life when you felt your soul growing? When and what was that like? What things do you do that make you feel you are taking this chance of life to grow your self, your character, who you are?**
3. **What does soul mean to you? Do you think people have a soul and if so what is its nature?**
4. Soulful means to experience deep emotion or feelings? **What experiences make you feel soulful, make you feel deeply? Do you have a different definition of soulful?**
5. Joseph Campbell says people often think we are all searching for a meaning for life, but what we are really seeking is an experience of being alive. **What experiences make you feel alive?** Are there things you do, groups of people you belong to or spend time with that help you have this experience of being alive?
6. **Do you consider yourself to be a soulful person?** How is this manifested in your life, in your relationships, with your family, in your work, in your community?
7. **Is soulfulness only about emotion?** What about intellect and mind? What about the body?
8. A number of people describe soul and soulful as having to do with knowing ourselves and living in ways that honor our integrity and values. **How well do you think you know yourself? How is your life a reflection or not of who you truly are?**
9. If the language of soulfulness doesn't resonate, what other ways do you check in with yourself to see how you are doing physically, mentally and emotionally. **What is good in my life right now? What needs to be done? What stimulates me, what interests me?**
10. Katie Tallo says soul-crushers are the thoughts that creep into our minds saying "We are not good enough." In response to these, she describes the importance of toning your own soul for resilience against these thoughts. **Are there things you do that boost your soul, your resilience, that keep you on your own path, rather than feeling like you need to be somebody else?**
11. The theologian Howard Thurman said, don't ask what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive. **Are you doing – either professionally or personally – what makes you come alive?** If not, what obstacles are in your way? How might you make some room in your day, in your life, for things that make you come alive?

# Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

## First Thoughts and Wise Words

Soulful:

1. Full of or expressing deep feeling; profoundly emotional.
2. expressing or appearing to express deep and often sorrowful feeling:

### *The Oversoul*

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is not bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease and God, the cause, begins.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight, it comes as serenity and grandeur... The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

Within 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.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian Minister

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive." – Joseph Campbell

"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

~ Howard Thurman

### *Soul Lifts*

Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul? Then when your mother wanted to brag about you she could show people the picture and say, 'That's my daughter, doesn't she have a beautiful soul, all sparkly and many-colored and flowing all around her?'

Wouldn't it be great if we walked around surrounded by our souls, so that they were the first things people saw instead of the last things? Then people would judge us by who we really are instead of how we look.

Imagine no more racism, ageism, sexism, fatism, shortism, homophobia. Imagine falling in love with who a person is, just by looking at them. It would be a kind of cloaking device, hiding physical faults, defects or even perfections.

I'd want it to be mandatory. Then people would work at making their souls attractive instead of their bodies and faces. Imagine people knowing by your soul that you really need a hug. Imagine people helping each other and their souls changing colors or growing.

Imagine soul gyms with exercises to get your sagging soul in shape. Imagine long lines forming for soul-lifts at churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, [congregations] or nature's grand cathedrals.

- UU minister Tess Baumberger

"Say not, I have found the truth, but rather, I have found a truth. Say not, I have found the path of the soul. Say rather, I have met the soul walking upon my path. For the soul walks upon all paths. The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed. The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals."

-Kahlil Gibran

"I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver." - Maya Angelou

"One of the proofs of the immortality of the soul is that myriads have believed it. They also believed the world was flat." Mark Twain

"Religious instruction should aim chiefly to turn men's aspirations and efforts to that perfection of the soul, which constitutes it a bright image of God." –William Ellery Channing, Unitarian Minister, 1828

Soul rhymes with Whole - and these words mean much the same to me. A person's soul is a person's whole - it's more than spirit, but includes spirit. It's more than love, but includes love. Soul includes body, mind and heart - feelings and actions - it's the wholeness of each of us. It is also the holiness of each of us. – Worship Associate

Unitarian Universalist Minister, A. Powell Davies, said "Life is just a chance to grow a soul." I've always nodded when I heard it - life is a serious, undertaking; it's about growing better in some way, it's about what we do to grow while we are alive. – Worship Associate

"When you do things from your soul you feel a river moving in you, a joy. When action comes from another section, the feeling disappears." - Jelaladin Rumi, Sufi poet

The progress of our soul is like a perfect poem. It has an infinite idea which once realized makes all movements full of meaning and joy. -Rabindranath Tagore

"Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment. And I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." -.George Bernard Shaw

"Why do you hasten to remove anything which hurts your eye, while if something affects your soul you postpone the cure until next year?" - Horace

"Everywhere we go we take our souls with us. And every time we meet someone we wrap a little piece of our souls around them." Steven Smith

To me, the soul is the essence of a person. I am soul. My body is the container. Soulfulness is the expression of soul. – Small Group Ministry Facilitator

"It is through the small details of everyday life that we make our souls feel welcome. Tending the things around us and becoming sensitive to the importance of home, daily schedule, and maybe even the clothes we wear are ways of caring for the soul." By Thomas Moore from Care of the Soul

What are soul crushers? Likely, we all know them – those seemingly trivial thoughts that sidle casually up to our souls and whisper, "You're not good enough." – or those disarmingly small habits that lead our souls by the hand towards ill health, anger, self loathing or feelings of failure. I've danced with them all – looking for easy fixes to my diet, magic bullets for toning my body and the perfect advice on how to live my life which I follow and inevitably end up on someone else's path. Each whisper, each habit, each opinion I follow, I feel less connected to my soul. – Katie Tallo

Your soul is you. It is where all your vivid imaginings, great ideas and most heartfelt dreams are not only born, but nurtured and live. If your soul is damaged, defensive, neglected, slack or angry, those imaginings can be lost and those dreams can go unfulfilled. – Katie Tallo

I think you can't experience soulfulness unless you are right with yourself. You have to be able to be proud of your actions and not regret your current behavior. It's about honesty - if you're lying to yourself or otherwise dishonest with people you can't experience your own soulfulness. – Worship Associate

THE DANCER An Excerpt From *The Wanderer* by Khalil Gibran, courtesy of Iman:

Once there came to the court of the Prince of Birkasha a dancer and her musicians. And she was admitted to the court. And she danced to the music of the flute, the lute, and the zither. She danced the dance of flames and fire, and the dance of swords and spears; she danced the dance of stars and the dance of space, and then she danced the dance of flowers in the wind.

When she had finished... The prince bade her to come nearer, and said, "Beautiful woman, daughter of grace and delight, whence comes your art?"...

And the dancer came near and bowed her body and said, "Gracious majesty, I know not the answer to your questionings. Only this I know: The philosopher's soul dwells within his head, the poet's soul dwells within his heart, the singer's soul dwells about his throat, but the soul of the dancer abides in all her body."

- Kahlil Gibran

Notice when you touch your sternum. You may be trying to convey a sincerity that comes from the soul.

– Worship Associate

What lies behind us  
and lies before us  
are small matters  
compared to what lies within us.

-Ralph W. Emerson

Thinking is the talking of the soul with itself. - Plato

A lively, understanding spirit once entertained you.

It will come again.

Be still. Wait.

- from *Words For The Wind* by Theodore Roethke

The intellect is wholly insufficient without input from our instincts. - Worship Associate

“The earth was full of life and there were dandelions growing out the window, thick as thieves, already seeded, fat as big yellow plungers. She let my hand go. I got up. “I’ll go out and dig a few dandelions,” I told her. Outside, the sun was hot and heavy as a hand on my back. I felt it flow down through my arms, out my fingers, arrowing through the ends of the fork into the earth. With every root I prized up there was return, as if I was kin to its secret lesson. The touch got stronger as I worked through the grassy afternoon. Uncurling from me like a seed out of the darkness where I was lost, the touch spread. The spiked leaves full of bitter mother’s milk. A buried root. A nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither. A globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible. --- Louise Erdrich, “Love Medicine,” Love Medicine, pp.214-215

The prayer preceding all prayers is this:

"May it be the real I who speaks,  
"May it be the real thou that I speak to" -Rabbi Zusya  
(To me, this doesn't just mean speaking to "God", but speaking to others: the concept of the "soulmate")  
– Small Group Facilitator

I built on the sand, and it tumbled down.  
I built on a rock and it tumbled down.  
Now when I build,  
I shall start with smoke from the chimney  
- by Polish poet Leopold Staff from *Foundations*  
(in other words, the smoke (the soul) is the foundation of being, above and beyond physical matter.)  
–Small Group Facilitator

On Sunday afternoon, while I was driving my young daughters to their mother's house in a nearby town, the first line of a story had come to me. I was talking with my daughters and watching cars and the road, and suddenly the sentence was inside me; it had come from whatever place they come from. It is not a place I can enter at will; I simply receive its gifts. I had been gestating this story for a very long time, not thinking about it, but allowing it to possess me, and waiting to see these characters living in me: their faces, their bodies. I do not begin writing a story until I see the people and the beginning of the story. In that space between my heart and diaphragm was the fear I always feel before writing, when my soul is poised to leap alone. - Andre Dubus, from "Love in the Morning," *Meditations from a Movable Chair*

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are. - Jose Saramago, *Blindness*

Alfred Whitehead, a developer of Process Philosophy, and often called one of the brightest minds of the 20th century, defines religion as “what the individual does with his own solitariness.” It is in these quiet times of solitude and contemplation that I am fully free to express the emotions and feelings that is my “soulfulness.” My life is filled with pressures to reconcile conflicting calls for allegiance to diverse institutional ideas, principles or actions. Yet my soul cries out for a coherent holistic path that I can follow to accomplish the Being of MY choice. “Becoming” is my life purpose, and becoming who I choose to be drives how I deal with religious, political, scientific, aesthetic and social experiences and reconciles my successes and failures with my ideal Being.

The individual that enters the solitude is a product of a lifetime of thoughts, experiences, social interactions and physical encounters. It is in this private phase where only I can decide how to integrate all the previous influences of Being. The process is one of perpetual oscillation of external influences and private assessment. Both steps are necessary, one for experiencing the noisy dizziness of a clamoring world; the other for a quite creative advance in the evolution of Being. By interweaving what already is and what might be, I am breaking with the continuity of the past and determining what of that past I want to use and what to discard. It is in this moment of sovereignty that I emerge as a new individual, to continue the process of living and experiencing until another period of solitude.

In each private time there will be a joy of accomplishment in some transitions and a disappointment of failure in others, but my soulfulness demands accountability; demands a redirection of effort in failure or doubling down in success. I will rejoice in who I am today and acknowledge the progress toward advancing the principles in which I firmly believe. I will assess the changing nature of the world and my newly emerged self to insure that my path continues to lead to my Ideal self. Then, today and tomorrow and every moment afterward, until I return to soulfulness, I will use the resources of my mind and body to act and think in accordance with the Being that I choose to Become. – Small Group Facilitator

“I have found that I am most likely to be conscious of matters of the soul when I am doing...nothing! Waking up very slowly, meditating, or just sitting outside and smelling the roses or watching the clouds. Our busy lives and "to do" lists often seem to prevent us from just stopping and filling our souls.” – Small Group Facilitator

Every moment and every event in every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. -Thomas Merton

What is soulfulness to a UU? Being more of who you are -- and knowing it, and knowing too that you didn't have a lot to do with its coming over you, that you can't control it but you can accept it or deny it. Soulfulness to me also implies action, being "response-able." At these times the feeling of invincibility comes over you, realizing the fullness of the gift you are receiving, and doing something good with it. I've experienced soulfulness playing baseball, reading, writing, and -- sometimes -- even at church. -- Small Group Facilitator

"Fixing and helping create a distance between people, but we cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected. Helping, fixing and serving represent three different ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak, when you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul. Service rests on the premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose. From the perspective of service, we are all connected." -from "Helping, Fixing or Serving" by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen.

If soulfulness is expressing deep feelings or being powerfully emotional, as the dictionary would suggest, then I suggest taking any of your intense negative emotions and turning them into soulfulness. How? Empower yourself to do right by others, and in the process make an outlet for the earnest tidings of your inner workings.

– Worship Associate

Soulfulness is that deep inner voice that can sometimes be ignored when life gets in the way. Come back to it. You'll find a way to forget the minutiae and love your brothers and sisters with renewed openness.

– Worship Associate

The realization that we are all kin. That's a soulful thing.  
- Worship Associate

Knowing a thing is intellectual. Feeling a thing, knowing it down to your bones, is soulful. - Worship Associate

One of the things that speaks directly to my soul is beautiful music, and one piece that never fails to move me deeply is Mozart's clarinet concerto, especially the second movement. The music absolutely soars, brings me to tears, fills my soul with sweetness. We were playing a recording of it not long ago, and I couldn't help but wonder: How is it possible for humankind to create such heavenly beauty and then turn around and slaughter one another on the battlefield? -- Small Group Facilitator

Cherish your visions and your dreams as they are the children of your soul, the blueprints of your ultimate achievements. - Napoleon Hill

Even though I'm skeptical of what might be called "airy-fairy stuff," I do think everyone has a soul, and I think of my soul as the deepest part of me, the inherently good part, the part that is pure love, the part that may just possibly survive death. When I behave in harmony with my soul, it always feels right. In fact, my only regrets in life are those moments when I didn't follow this basic, spiritual part of me and acted out of selfishness, meanness or dishonesty.  
– Small Group Facilitator

"One's soul has been described as the spiritual part of oneself that is distinct from the physical body. It is the center of our human feeling. Soulfulness also encompasses the ways in which we cherish, nurture and care for our souls. Psychologists have said we nourish our souls by cultivating an ability to respond positively to life's events and by sustaining a passionate involvement in our interests, values and projects." -- Small Group Facilitator

## Online Articles, Videos and Podcasts

Louie Schwartzberg: *Nature. Beauty. Gratitude.* [A Ted Talk]

[http://www.ted.com/talks/louie\\_schwartzberg\\_nature\\_beauty\\_gratitude.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/louie_schwartzberg_nature_beauty_gratitude.html)

"Medicine's Search for Meaning" by David Bornstein. New York Times, September 18, 2013

[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/18/medicines-search-for-meaning/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/18/medicines-search-for-meaning/?_r=0)

"Helping, Fixing or Serving" by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen.

<http://www.uc.edu/content/dam/uc/honors/docs/communityengagement/HelpingFixingServing.pdf>

"Strengthen Your Inner Core with a little Soul Training" by Katie Tallo

<http://goodlifezen.com/strengthen-your-inner-core-with-a-little-soul-training/>

"Oprah Tells and Atheist She Believes in God"

<http://www.upworthy.com/oprah-tries-to-tell-an-atheist-what-to-think-the-atheist-responds-like-a-christian-or-any-human-am2-6c?c=ufb1>