

Growing the Soul
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From Denise Levertov:

The world is
not with us enough.

O taste and see

the subway Bible poster said,
meaning **The Lord**, meaning—
if anything—
all that lives
to the imagination's tongue,

grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform
into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being

hungry, and plucking
the fruit.

The world is not with us enough, says the poet. We can say this, and feel this, while acknowledging the paradox in the statement. Not with us? The world is filled with chatter in the multitude of media with its incessant gossip, its obsession with our human failures and shortcomings, with the most recent scandal and the latest brutalities. . . the world chatters at us from within, from our old tapes playing out our fears, our mistakes, our strategies and our goals, our internal and external pressures to have, and to get, and to do—the world is *too much* with us!

Not only is the world too much with us, but it sometimes grinds us down with relentless force. The world batters us, rips at our fragile self of hope, brings us to despair; dulls our appetite for wonder and for life.

And still—there's some truth to the assertion that the world is not with us enough. It's the world "that lives to the imagination's tongue," all that we "breathe, bite, savor, chew, swallow, transform into our flesh. . . ."

That world—the world of depth, the world with which we can engage passionately, living in the orchard and, hungry, plucking the fruit — *that* is the world that is not

with us enough.

To enter that world, to have it with us and to give ourselves to it — this is the province of soul. To taste and see, to restore ourselves to the silence of a profounder listening, is the realm of the soul. To know ourselves, to love ourselves and the world deeply, reverently, genuinely, is the realm of the soul. For *soul* is that which rises up to meet the day when we are too sad, or frightened or weary to stand. Soul is that which gives us strength, and hope, and courage—that connects us to what is of ultimate worth and meaning.

Let me be clear on what I am *not* talking about when I speak of the soul. I do not refer to some aspect of ourselves, separate from our bodies, which lives on after our deaths. I am not speaking of dualism here. That concept of the soul derives from the Christian church, primarily from Augustine — known as Saint Augustine, who wrote in the fifth century. There is, surprisingly, something of value in his understanding of the soul, as well as something subversive and disempowering which UUs tend to reject.

The soul was seen by Augustine as possessing three qualities: “to be,” “to live,” and “to understand.” These are compatible with my use of the term — soul is that within us that deepens and wants more — the realm of longing, of yearning for a deeper level of engagement with life.

On the other hand, Augustine conceived the soul as being fallen — permanently and indelibly stained by original sin. While we resist this—a baby is pure and innocent—not stained with original sin! But—I remember once in seminary how a Jesuit priest explained original sin as being born into an unjust and exploitative society. Well, ok then.

What I cannot accept — what I passionately repudiate — is Augustine's denial of free will — his assertion that this stain, or this estrangement can only be remedied by God — that we are totally powerless to do anything about it. “*We can deform God's image in us; we cannot reform it,*” he said. Not only do I reject this, but I identify this dogma as a source of great evil and abuse. I insist that, not only *can* we reform it — but it cannot be done without us!

Augustine's concept of our powerlessness to overcome our estrangement from God, and his accompanying pre-destinarianism, or his belief that God saves some and damns others for eternity, this is what inspired John Calvin in the sixteenth century and motivated our forebears to develop our heresy of Universalism.

Basically, these guys made this stuff up! If you look at the Bible, you don't find

much reference to soul. The first Biblical use of the term is found in Genesis, in the story of the creation of the first people. It is interesting that the story of our creation is told twice, suggesting the weaving together of two strands, two ancient stories. In Chapter One of Genesis, Adam and Eve are created together. The text reads, “So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”

Chapter Two relates another story. “And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

In the second story, we didn't just get made, we were animated by a breath from the divine. We became *living souls*. Or at least Adam did—Eve getting formed from his rib comes later.

Anyway, in the development of Christian dogma, the idea took hold that the body and soul were separate. And the dualistic notion was embraced that body is bad and soul is good. Much damage has been done by this understanding. I would follow Joseph Priestley's understanding, so radical in the eighteenth century when “No-Soul Priestley” wrote that the soul and the body are inseparable.

When I use the term *soul* I mean the deepest part of us —the wellspring of energy, experience, and engagement with life. It is the source of our ability to be transformed and alive to the world. In this sense, we do not *have* a soul, but rather we *are* a soul. As Genesis said, we “*became* living souls.”

Soul is not ego. Soul is not who we are on the surface. It is rather something deeper which we evoke and evolve in the course of a life fully pondered, fully felt, fully lived. Soul is the difference between having things happen to us and our having experiences.

Growing the soul is not a self-improvement project. Its purpose is not to make you a better spouse, or better worker, or better parent. These things may indeed flow from it, but there are no guarantees. Soul is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Growing the soul is not about the self you have chosen, but the self you truly are.

Growing the soul is a lifelong task. In fact, it has been said to be the purpose of life itself. It is what we are here to do.

We limit ourselves if we think that all we are is our ego, our everyday consciousness. I once heard someone compare us to little children at the seashore. Sometimes, when faced by the immensity of the ocean, at the vast, roaring deep,

sometimes they turn from its overwhelming presence. They turn their backs, and sit in the sand, and there they create a smaller version of a world. Perhaps with houses, castles, roads, and a smaller, more manageable ocean. They make a world on a scale they can comprehend. And it works for a while, you know. . . until the tide comes in and the ocean asserts itself and reclaims that small world.

If we are to take up the work of growing the soul, we must ask ourselves, what is it that feeds the soul? And what is it that starves the soul? While we each must answer that question for ourselves, there are some guidelines to aid us in our quest for soul.

The poet Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, said it simply and well. “I can't give you any advice but this: to go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows. . .”

To go into ourselves means to pay attention. It means setting aside distractions. You know people who always have the TV on, or the music playing? I've been that way myself, at times, when being alone with my *self* was painful, or scary, or boring. Like the silence was threatening. And it can be threatening. The silence reveals to us the depths from which our lives flow.

This attentive observation requires that we stop running away from ourselves. We can't hide, anyway. It means feeling the way we feel, not covering up or denying. Thomas Moore, in *Care of the Soul*, says that “It comes from living close to the heart, and not at odds with it. . . soul power may emerge from failure, depression, and loss.” It means a tolerance of our weakness, acceptance of our mistakes, feeling our pain.

There is in too much of contemporary therapy and pop psychology a kind of mechanistic metaphor — the idea that we can just “fix ourselves.” There is the idea that pain, doubt, confusion are malfunctions that can be eliminated with a psychological tune-up. Growing the soul is about paying attention to the meaning of our pain, not fixing it. Some of our pain we will always have with us. It need not debilitate us. And for the sake of the soul, for the sake of integrity our pain must be felt, acknowledged, and even honored.

Of course, pain is not all we find from going within. Entering this silence, going into ourselves, means attending to a wide range of our “dreams, memories, and reflections,” to use Carl Jung's phrase. The images which come to us, unbidden, have much to tell us. Our fantasies and daydreams have power. They influence us, our self image and our behavior. We turn a blind eye to them at our peril.

But this doesn't mean analyzing or understanding them. What is the meaning of our

dreams, our imaginings, our fantasies? When we pay attention to them at all, I think we are too quick to seek their meaning, to *force* them to usefulness. In soul work, paying attention to ourselves is more about respecting our inner lives. It is about bringing our dreams and fantasies to awareness, and listening to the stories they tell us.

It is more like the way we approach art. What does a great painting *mean*? What is the meaning of a moving piece of music or sculpture, or poetry? It is easy to chuckle at one who asks these questions; it is a bit easier for us to accept the ambiguity of art, to be content with the experience. This is true with natural beauty as well. What is the meaning of the light filtering through the leaves, or shining brightly on the snow? What is the meaning of the moon rising in the nighttime sky? We are content, indeed blessed to be moved to wonder — useless, mysterious wonder.

The soul craves beauty. Beauty is sometimes our only antidote to despair. Even when hope is far away from us, as long as we retain the capacity to be surprised by beauty, we can find within us the strength to go on.

George Steiner, in his wonderful book *Real Presences*, asks, “*Why* is there art? What does the artist do, but work from the soul? Is God ever not present?” Or perhaps the realm of the holy lies in the encounter — when our soul connects or engages with art.

We can speak of the meaning of art, and careers and institutions and many words attempt to do this, without ever getting at it. Art speaks for itself, and we participate in its meaning.

Art invites. I would go so far as to suggest that the art is only half-present in its creation, for art cannot exist in a vacuum. Just as a tree falling in the forest would make no sound without the ear to perceive it, art cannot exist except in the intersection of the work of the artist and the response of the perceiver. Robert Browning once said that the world of art “will knock and rap and enter into our soul.” In that intersection, in that pausing to be moved, impacted, perhaps transformed, the soul is engaged.

What feeds the soul? In art, there is both being impacted by art and making it directly — through song, dance, writing. . . Singing does it for me. Being in nature. Getting a good look at a beautiful new bird. Or even a beautiful familiar one.

My work with you feeds my soul — especially when we “speak of things that matter - with words that must be said.”

What starves the soul? If we pay attention, it is revealed. Toxic people can starve the soul. Some people lift you up - and others. . . well, you know. We need to pay attention to the people we spend time with, to evaluate their impact on the soul.

Our work can feed or starve the soul. There were times in my life when my work was doing me harm. I had to pay attention. It is no accident that we speak of someone who has sold his or her soul. It is a real danger.

Spiritual discipline is a means of feeding the soul. I know it sounds daunting. The word “discipline” puts some people off; it sounds like such a major commitment. It is a commitment — but it doesn't have to be complicated.

Spiritual discipline can be found in movement, meditation, or prayer. It can be as simple as setting aside five or ten minutes a day for relaxation, for contemplation. It can be working in a garden, or taking a walk — to the extent that you do it with full attention.

Developing an interior life means taking time. I like to think of spiritual practice as providing myself time for getting out of my own way. For taking “time out.” It is, for me, a time to let go of my usual occupations and preoccupations, to stop thinking about what I “need” to do, and giving myself some undivided attention. It is entering into the silence.

I leave you with this Annie Dillard excerpt from *Teaching A Stone to Talk*: “At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing, or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused now everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence. . .

“The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters, it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to “World.” Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.”

AMEN