

Soul, Standing Ajar

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Hastings on Hudson, NY

October 25, 2015

Reading

Over-Soul by Unitarian Minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson

...The only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul within which everyone's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains everyone to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand and become wisdom and virtue and power and beauty.

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

Sermon

About ten years ago, something very sad happened in my life. I've talked about it here before so I'm not going to talk about it again today. At the time, I had a meeting with a new colleague, someone I didn't know. Because of all that had happened, I'd cancelled our first meeting so that when we did finally get together, he asked me what was going on. I was in a very fragile state at the time and wasn't able to lie, so when he asked, I told him. I told him my whole sad story. And this new colleague sat across from me and cried. As I told him my story, tears fell down his face at least as much as they were falling down mine. He didn't move, didn't run for a tissue or grab a glass of water to drink his sadness down. He sat still, staring at me, at cried.

I'm not sure, if you had asked me before that meeting, how I'd have felt if you told me this new colleague was going to cry if I told him my story. I might have avoided it, just told him I was fine and moved on. I'd have guessed, before it happened, that I'd feel too awkward and want to avoid that kind of situation. But I didn't know, so I told him the truth. And he cried. He wasn't a friend, wasn't family. He wasn't even a colleague I'd ever met before. This was the first conversation he and I ever had. And he cried many tears. And, it turns out, I needed him to do that. I needed in that moment, one of the first conversations I had outside my family, for this kind of genuine human contact. I needed to know that my grief had a place, that it wasn't going to be dismissed.

His name is Nate and when I think of Soul, standing ajar, I can't help but think of the way Nate was open to me that afternoon. I'm sure he wasn't expecting it, but he didn't run from it nor did he hide it. He was unguarded and that was healing for me.

“The soul should always stand ajar
That if the Heaven inquire,
He will not be obliged to wait
Or shy of troubling her...”

That's from an Emily Dickenson poem. “The soul should always stand ajar.” It's an invitation to great openness, and also to great depth. Soul is that part of ourselves that is Most Real. It is the source of our wisdom. It's not easily accessed.

I think of soul like a shy doe. I live in the woods with many deer and even though they know me and are willing to live and raise their babies very close to my house, I can't approach them directly. They run away, they hide, they do what they can not to be noticed.

Mary Oliver has a famous poem I've read here before called “The Place I Want To Get Back To”
The Place I want to get back to

is where
in the pinewoods
in the moments between
the darkness
and first light
two deer
came walking down the hill
and when they saw me
they said to each other, okay,
this one is okay,
let's see who she is
and why she is sitting
on the ground, like that,
so quiet, as if
asleep, or in a dream,
but, anyway, harmless;
and so they come
on their slender legs
and gazed upon me
not unlike the way
I go out to the dunes and look
and look and look
into the faces of the flowers;
and then one of them leaned forward
and nuzzled my hand, and what can my life
bring me that could exceed
that brief moment?
For twenty years
I have gone every day to the same woods,
not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
Such gifts, bestowed,
can't be repeated.
If you want to talk about this
come to visit. I live in the house
near the corner, which I have named
Gratitude.

She's telling a story of sitting so still, so silently, that two deer came right to her and nuzzled her hand. It's a precious moment, one that has, in some way, changed her life. It is a gift for which she has lived in gratitude for 20 years.

I imagine that soul is similar. If we want a sweet nuzzle, if we want to be in touch with our own depth, we will have to sit very still. We will have to be gentle, even harmless, which begins in honesty born of humility. We will have to be awake to ourselves, willing to see clearly, to let go of the busyness and the violence it produces. If we want to be able to create the kind of stillness needed to be in touch with the still, small voice that speaks at our center, we have to find peace of acceptance in all our imperfections. It's then that we can be perfectly still, profoundly still. This is the kind of stillness that comes after a long time of being quiet, after a spiritual practice of quiet that might take many years.

I feel like myself in the silence. It doesn't matter how magnificent my life has been, how exciting or fulfilling I find my days, if I don't have time to be quiet, it goes unprocessed and can even feel unreal. If I go without silence for too long, my whole life feels like a dream I'm experiencing while sleepwalking, which I suppose is what I'm doing. Silence is a precious gift and when I incorporate it into my life, I can begin to hear that little voice that comes from way down deep. That's the soul-voice, the part of me - and part of each of us -

that is connected to something primal, something larger than any one of us.

In his essay, *Over-soul*, which is where our reading today came from, Emerson explains the soul this way...

“...the soul...is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being; in which they lie,—an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A human is the facade of a temple wherein *all* wisdom and *all* good abide.”

I have a vision of the world that I’ve been carrying with me since college. Before I tell you, I want you to remember that all theology is poetry. We’re talking about things we can’t discuss directly, so we find ways to point toward it, to talk around it, to use metaphor, to use art to get us close to what we mean and let our hearts do the rest of the talking.

My theological vision of the world is that of an hourglass. (Like this- make motion of hourglass.) The cosmos- this massive, infinite, universe- pours into the human person – where it becomes Soul and continues out, infinite and complete. Cosmos is All. Soul is All.

When I read Emerson’s *Over-Soul*, I realize he and I have similar understandings of the nature of the universe and the human person.

“...the act of seeing and the thing seen...the subject and the object are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul”

What a wonderful, wild, even radical, vision of the cosmos Emerson is offering us here. *The whole of the world*, of which we see the shining parts, *is the soul*. We are each the whole of the world. We are each called to be so open, the cosmos can pour in.

Mother Theresa said a similar thing. “May God break my heart so completely that the whole world can fall in.” My new colleague, Nate, might have prayed the same prayer. He sat before me and let all my sadness, my confusion, my pain fall into the heart he had let break open.

When Emily Dickenson entreats the reader to let the soul stand ajar, it’s so that Heaven won’t have to wait. While grief might not be the poetic equivalent of Heaven, I think they are related. I think that when we are able to find our deepest selves and to live perfectly open to life, everything that comes to us is a gift. Every sadness and every joy is welcome. Our vulnerability brings us great power, tremendous strength. It’s the confrontation with the many expressions of the human condition that brings us deeper into cosmic living, deeper into the infinite soul.

We are all one. Cosmos and soul. The seen and the seer. The object and the subject. When soul stands ajar, Heaven pours in.

And if I haven’t made enough poetic leaps for you today, I’m going to make one more. Ellen is here today talking about a dangerous pipeline expansion. This is a project that assumes increased reliance on fossil fuels, profit as priority and Earth as expendable, relevant only as supply source and sewer. But as I watch the trees get torn down and habitats become annihilated, I can’t help but know that we are One. That we are radically connected to all that exists, that we are tearing apart our own soul, the core of our being, the depth of who we are. Each loss is my loss, every death is ours.

Part of what it means for soul to stand ajar, is to let the whole world pour in. That includes the pain that comes as a result of our arrogance of place, the arrogance that allows us to believe human life, or more to the point, human profit, is at the center of all concern. It’s the result of our inability to make room for other life and even for the dangerous short-sightedness of profit-making over the value of sustainability or recognizing Earth’s right to life.

If we know ourselves to be connected at our core, we know this kind of action to be suicide. When we are able to sit still, to lean into the silence that opens us to our depth, we know that the violence being done to our planet is being done directly to us.

That there have been serious warnings from respected and well educated scientists about this pipeline, is of concern. That we live in the blast radius of Indian Point which becomes all the more dangerous with this pipeline running so close to it, is also of concern. That we can’t seem to hear voices of truth over voices of profit is, for me, of utmost concern. We move too fast. We aren’t listening. We live fragmented lives that can only see

the world piece by piece. As Emerson said, the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole is the soul.

Lest you think I'm pointing fingers, let me assure you, I see this pipeline expansion as an extension of our own, collective brokenness. This is one result of our system, a system of which we are all a part. This is an interdependent web and every piece relies on all the others. This destruction is a manifestation of our disconnection from our Selves, our souls, the depth of our own being.

Fighting our impulses for death is how we begin to reconnect. When we cultivate a practice of silence, we cultivate a practice of truth-telling, of living in honesty and humility with ourselves. Our ability to be open, to stand ajar, comes from the power we gain in the silence. The source of that power is the connection we discover with all the Earth, with all the cosmos. The power we discover comes from this wild, radical interdependence with everything that exists. From the core of who we are, we know we are connected, rooted together with all of life.

Hope comes from our silence. Hope comes from being so still even the shy doe of our deepest selves will speak to us. Hope comes from hearing Truth spoken from our core, a Truth that reveals our connection to the cosmos. But most importantly, hope comes from being open, letting soul stand ajar and experiencing each other's joy and sorrow, being so open, the whole world can pour in.