

Soaring Spirit, Deepening Soul

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First Parish in Brookline

“Come down from the hills. Declare the fighting done. Be bold – declare victory,” this is how Lynn Ungar, CLF minister for lifespan learning introduces Hanukkah for Unitarian Universalists. Hanukkah begins at sundown next Friday, December 11 for observant Jews. It is a time for remembrance, which is deep soul work, and a time to encourage those who do remember to expect miracles! This is a time for soaring spirit and deepening soul. Lynn Ungar concludes, “It would take a miracle, you say, to carve such a solid life out of the shell of fear. I say you are the stuff from which such miracles are made.” I felt very proud to be standing with 25 adult members of our congregation last Tuesday afternoon at Brookline High School, to show support for our youth, and all the youth of the Brookline community, in the face of hate from a demonstration by a Kansas fundamentalist group. We stood together firmly and joyously on the side of love. We are the stuff from which miracles of love are made. Last weekend was Eid-al-Adha, the festival of sacrifice for observant Muslims worldwide. Best Buy managed to stir up a lot of American hatefulness by printing “Blessed Eid” on circulars for its Black Friday bacchanalia of shopping, though the controversy doesn’t seem to have limited the crowds shopping at Best Buy on this commercial holiday, called Black Friday because for many American retailers it is the first profitable shopping day for this calendar year. Gross and obscene consumerism is strongly encouraged in America even while a little religious neighborliness is the subject of hate mail. When will we learn to accept each other and encourage each on their distinctive path?

We sang this morning *People Look East* which expresses a deep earnestness with which we look forward to the returning Yuletide and the coming of the Winter Solstice. When Loretta and I lived in Munich, a traditionally Catholic part of Germany, the Yuletide encompassed essentially the entire month from December 6 through January 6: a magical time of jolliness and joy. This is a pagan midwinter holiday that involves lots of drinking, mistletoe, lots of drinking, decorating evergreen trees, festivals with wine and song, and presents! Loretta and I always buy our holiday tree early as we did last weekend. Our German friends have noticed that today’s American Christmas celebration looks more like a Yuletide celebration, with shopping, than the Christ’s Mass of earlier Americans. It is for some a consumerist holiday, with drinking, yet I yearn for that story that encompasses a soaring spirit, and the gatherings which foster a deepening of our soul this time of year. Let’s explore together what this soaring and deepening might entail.

I begin with Christian minister and theologian Howard Thurman describing this time of anticipation which marks the American Christmas holiday. This mood of Christmas is captured in a quickening of activities, happy memories, deep soul satisfying time spent with friends and family. That is why FPB has brought our holiday feast back into the thick of these festivities, if you haven’t gotten your tickets yet it is on Saturday December 19 and not to be missed! As a matter of fact, for those of you who cannot get enough holiday joy, in the week before Christmas we offer the Holiday Feast on Saturday Night, a celebration of Joy to the World on Sunday

morning, and a soul deepening worship service on the Monday night that is the winter solstice. There is a path into this time of year for each and every person. And I sing all the songs, Hanukkah, Yuletide, Solstice, Christmas, letting the joy of the season wash over me without quibbling about the words, but seeking a soaring and deepening experience.

But this sermon isn't primarily about various forms of holiday fun, but rather an exploration of what makes our spirits soar while deepening our souls. This question was posed to me by a Jungian psychologist and theologian Tom Moore when we spent four days together at UUMA Convocation exploring deeply our spirit and soul. I should warn you the Jungians make a distinction between the lightness of Spirit and the deep work of Soul. Spirit is transcendent! If our everyday lives are like the trunk of a tree, adding a ring for every year we survive, they say our spirit is like branches and leaves of that tree, stretching forth and eagerly grasping all of the sunlight in our surrounding environment to convert it into life giving energy for our wellbeing. A tree without branches or leaves is dead wood. So spirit is airy, and like winter leaves, can fade away and let go of attachments that no longer serve the purpose for which they were constructed. Our soaring spirit connects us with the Transcendent. That which is! Deepening Soul connects us with the Ground of Being. That which is! With our glorious music, in this stained glass sanctuary, we help feed our spirits, even if you are just a visitor here, you may feel it. Our spiritual work here transcends relationships and can help our spiritual journey: join in, enjoy, Merry Christmas!

Tom Moore says spirit work is transcendent, unattached, while soul work is intimate, homey, deeply attached, and personal. He says the Greek philosopher Epicurus named "where there are simple pleasures, that is, where the soul is fed." If we wish to do spiritual searching and deep soul work we make a personal commitment. We come to be known by and know each other in a way that is intimate. According to our principles, UU's covenant to accept one another and encourage each other in our spiritual growth in community. For me, our flaming chalice is a reminder of this soul and spirit work in community, the chalice representing our deep soul work and the flame representing the fire of spirit, fostered in community. We establish Small Group Ministry groups, affinity groups, UU Bible classes, Adult Education classes, and lots and lots of differing forms of worship and festivities to facilitate our emergence as healthy spiritual beings. If our mundane lives are like tree trunks, growing ever thicker until finally cut down by lightning or fire, and our spirit work is like the branches and leaves that capture the energy of the sun and convert it for our needs, then soul work is like our expanding root system running deep underground, forging connections with all those who come into our sphere, most of our connections unseen, yet providing the watering and nourishment we need to grow into strong healthy beings, firmly rooted in our places, surrounded by an intimate community of care. This place has deep roots, going back nearly 300 years, with 12 generations having already pursued personal spiritual journeys within the context of this community. Tom Moore says that a healthy spiritual life requires both transcendent spiritual work and deep soul connections. Spirit yearns continually for order yet soul work is messy.

As a psychotherapist Tom says those who passionately pursue their personal spiritual journeys, while neglecting deep personal relationships, may come to him with guilt. Unattached they can make great strides with a spiritual teacher or meditating in a monastery, but they can become soul sick if they neglect intimate relationships. While he says those who become enmeshed

with their intimate surroundings, ignoring the call of their spirit to their transcendent being, may present with depression. They can become so enmeshed in relationships, work, home, extended family and friends, that their life can become flat or boring, missing a transcendence of spirit. In order to live our lives fully, he recommends that we engage our lives consistently with body, spirit and soul. We are not disembodied spirits, nor are we epicureans seeking only the joys of our soul, but we are embodied human beings, requiring a combination of body, spirit and soul to maintain our self in healthy balance with life.

My time spent with Tom Moore brought me back to my journey of discovery 15 years ago when I first read his book “Care of the Soul” in which he says: “One of the strongest needs of the soul is for community, but community from the soul point of view is a little different from its social forms. Soul yearns for attachment, for variety in personality, for intimacy and particularity. So it is these qualities in community that the soul seeks out, and not like-mindedness and uniformity.” In that book he also says that Americans often enter into therapy complaining of emptiness, meaninglessness, depression, disillusionment about marriage, family, relationship, a loss of values, yearning for personal fulfillment, and a hunger for spirituality. He says many cultures would call these symptoms of ill health, being soul-sick, and tells us that Carl Jung thought them best dealt with in a religious context, within a deeply supportive religious community.

So I turned to Carl Jung’s 1933 book “Modern Man in Search of a Soul” and indeed in a chapter he called “Psychotherapists or Clergy” he writes: “Among all my patients in the second half of life, that is to say, over 35, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given their followers, and none of them has really healed who did not regain his [or her] religious outlook. This of course has nothing to do with a particular creed... This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of [human]kind. Measured against it, the names and forms which men have given it mean little enough; they are only the changing leaves and blossoms on the stem of the eternal tree.” How will you celebrate this holiday season? Carl Jung would recommend with spirit and soul!

A UU minister in Ohio, Arthur Severance offers these:

“ten suggestions for a happy holiday:

- 1) Remember that Christmas is a pagan holiday and so keep it merry and light!
- 2) Feel free to be as nostalgic as possible; make a list of your favorite gifts, favorite carol, favorite memory.
- 3) Don’t suppress any negative feelings which will naturally arise, but don’t dwell on them either.
- 4) Don’t sweat the small stuff and remind yourself that everything is small stuff when compared to the goings on of the universe in time and space.
- 5) Remind yourself that it is as natural to be depressed during the holidays as it is to be joyful; get plenty of rest during this time because the holidays are not only hectic, but they dredge up all sorts of memories and feelings.
- 6) Cry as much and whenever you feel like it; tears are therapeutic and crying is good for you.

- 7) Laugh as much as possible; bring out the child in you.
- 8) Sing with gusto along with Christmas carols; hum or whistle if you are shy.
- 9) Give generously to charities, especially Salvation Army Santa's and your church; buy yourself something, you deserve it!
- 10) Spend time with people you love! Call, visit, or write, but we need to love and be loved to be fully human. If you can't... be with family, go with friends, go to church, or volunteer somewhere. Relationships are at the core of all religion."

How will you spend this holiday season?

My message for all of us today, is do whatever we each need to do to rediscover our soaring spirit and deepening soul this time of year. By this we become well grounded yet are still able to soar! And if you still fail to see what I mean look at any grounded and majestic 300 year old tree. We weren't made for these holidays but rather these holidays were made for us.

I love you all dearly. Go forth in peace and joy. Blessed Be and Amen.