

*Care of the Soul, with a Capital S*  
By, Reverend Leslie Kee

Care of the Soul – this phrase has a very nice ring to it. Care of the Soul, I wonder if the word Soul should be capitalized? Proper nouns are those subject words like: a name – such as Hong Kong or Harry; a title – like Captain or Your Honor, or something more revered, like God.

But what about a soul? Even though it is a subject word, a soul isn't something you can purchase and bring home in a shopping bag, and just a reminder the fish fillet is spelled *sole*. A human soul isn't something like the color of your eyes or hair. We conceptualize a soul as distinct from things like our personality in that we might be an extrovert or an introvert. We might enjoy reading and gardening as compared to jet skis and hang gliding. But the general belief is no matter who we are on the outside, each of us has a soul on the inside.

At least, from my experience, it seems like humans, in general, believe each person has a soul even though it is an ethereal concept that sometimes challenges our ability to wrap our thoughts around. One thing that helped me clarify my beliefs about the nature of the soul was when I discovered how many Unitarian Churches were named, “All Souls.”

To name a church “All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church,” for me, sounds very welcoming and egalitarian because I associate the soul with human beings who aren't necessarily a martyr or a saint, one of those specific individuals who is held in a higher esteem by a lot of people. Not to say a saint doesn't have a soul, rather in my mind, you don't have to be a saint to have a soul.

‘All Souls’ makes me think of a crowd of church-goers who are equal in the eyes of God – where what you are wearing, where you came from, how much money you have or don't have, whom you love, or if you come with sorrow, joy, or a big question mark in your heart – all are arriving at a real place where all souls are truly welcome.

As the minister of a church which actually welcomes all souls, I try to meet each person where they are on their journey in life. It's a given that each one of us brings our own story and a large part of the enjoyment of meeting visitors is valuing this possibility. For me, it is equally important that each person who arrives at the doorstep, actually has arrived at the doorstep!

But, why is it so many individuals who come to visit our churches decide not to come back? For some reason, they decide this isn't the place where they can find answers, deepen their values, or raise their children? Are we doing everything we can to really be a place for All Souls?

Of course, the short answer is yes, UUs are doing everything we can to make sure our churches are an outward reflection of shared inward values.

Because we are Unitarian Universalists, the tasks of democratic self-governance are organized around a covenant – that promise we make to each other to behave in ways which value and honor every gift each of us brings to this church – especially our uniqueness, passion, life experience, intelligence, loyalty, creativity, and most important of all, the practice of honesty, forgiveness, and greater love.

One of the ways I like to think about covenant is to envision a stone-ringed campfire burning brightly in a small clearing deep within an unspoiled forest where the sky is so dark and clear the stars' lights feel like crystalline darts falling directly into the chambers of your heart. Where the air is so clean and crisp, you drink it in voracious gulps and then exhale it back into the universe imbued with the essence of your spirit. Covenant is like the stone-ringed fire in the center of this beautiful resting place: both are real and symbolic sources of centering and assurance which have captivated and comforted many souls from the beginning of time.

Probably because my spiritual practice includes as much time as possible staring into campfires while contemplating life, I have recently decided to evolve the label I use when asked about my religious beliefs. I am now officially referring to myself as a Spiritual Humanist instead of a Religious Humanist.

As a minister, one of the first things I learned was how to respond when someone says, “I am not a religious person, rather I consider myself a spiritual person.” To that I say, ‘I get it, in the sense I believe that by our very nature, all humans are spiritual beings.’ To be spiritual means having the ability to transcend our sense-of-self – to not be afraid of seeing our individual-self as part of an on-going, eternal, and beautiful organic change-process that is life itself. I am also comfortable with the idea of this capability for transcendence as being part of what makes up my soul.

Compared to soul and spirit, religion is a human construct beginning with the root of the word religion, *LIG*, which means to bind – like a ligament. Therefore religion, in its most commonly known form, is a set of beliefs which are effectively bound to each other – in traditional terms, a doctrine and the outward practice of it.

As participants within a doctrine-free church where reason, science, and experience are valued and factored in to our theology, we are not tied to using one exclusive scripture. Unitarian Universalist theology is about seeking and experiencing the revelation of truth from any or all of the great religious, philosophical, and historical collections. And because our covenant creates bonds of trust between us, we are able to exercise the freedom to question, sometimes agree, sometimes disagree – and always to forgive, learn and grow.

But not all people like to attend church in order to talk about religion and particularly differences between religions. Perhaps some of those who visit and do not return are not comfortable with this degree of intellectual and spiritual freedom in a church setting?

Whether you are comfortable with it or not, technically Unitarian Universalism is an organized religion, doctrine free-to be sure, but we have tax-exempt status, a shared history complete with prophets and martyrs; inward and outward symbols; buildings and books, music and ordained ministers; and, of course, a distinct and radical theology – a theology of love and inclusion.

On the outside, we look like any other church, but so much of what makes up Unitarian Universalism stems from the most basic principle within our radical theology: each person has inherent worth and capability. This fundamental tenant of our shared beliefs is radical because it is in direct contrast to America's dominate religious narrative and the widespread belief in the doctrine of original sin.

This specific teaching about the nature of sin has led generations to believe humans instinctually choose sin first instead of love. As I outgrew my mainstream Episcopalian beliefs, I came to a theological rejection of the Doctrine of Original Sin and eventually embraced the belief every child is born a spark of that which is a divine goodness – a tenant of contemporary Unitarian Universalism which draws from the Quaker tradition.

That each child should be wanted, nurtured, and raised within loving relationships because they have more than material worth, is an ancient wisdom which has endured through the ages. In today's world, the psychology within this belief is simple, children live up to the expectations of those who love and care for them: if you expect a child to be good then... But if you expect a child to be bad, then... In a theological context, it begs the question, what spiritual damage has been done by the privileging of sin before love? Perhaps some of our visitors who don't return were expecting a church where forgiveness of sin starts from a completely different theological premise?

Another aspect of my UU brand of Spiritual Humanism is more secular in that I believe each of us is born with natural rights – the right to healthy food, dignified shelter, good health and medical care, and accessible education, all while living in a larger community where our inherent ingenuity, capability, and work ethic are valued not exploited.

But being an idealist is sometimes easier than being a realist, and so the reality is conflict happens. In Buddhist terms, suffering exists and so much of suffering arises from our own doing because, especially in the USA, so many are attached to things – materially and existentially. One of the tools I use when it comes to coming to grips with suffering and the need for non-violent resolution of conflict is the belief there are three sides to every story – yours, mine and the truth.

To live life is a very complex multi-faceted endeavor, it is a grand and noble endeavor, therefore it deserves complex, nuanced, noble responses and not always a simple right or wrong, friend or enemy, good or evil. Unfortunately, this over-simplified world-view has curtailed the creation of alternative responses; for example, a wonderfully humane contribution to America's stymied criminal justice system is the Restorative Justice movement: a different, a possibly better, way to understand atonement

If we look through a three-dimensional lens, what we see is another existential dimension made up of liminal space: that in-between space where we find paradox – where everything is right and everything is wrong and everything is possible at the same time. It exists all around and through our lives, and it is most easily accessed by a slower humbler approach, one that isn't propelled by an incessant desire to control.

As a UU minister, one of my duties is to help us think more fearlessly as we search for new and improved words which will help us talk with each other and particularly with those who might not be coming back. What words did they hear or not hear that would cause them to stay away? What does the responsibility for effective communication look like?

For example, a church has traditionally been perceived as a house of God, but Unitarian Universalist churches are also a home for the human spirit, therefore do our churches feel like a sacred space where Divinity, the human spirit, and possibility for change are present and palpable? Is this something visitors are seeking but not finding?

As caretakers of our church, we must ask ourselves every day, is the valuing of right-relationship informing how we not only welcome visitors, but how we treat each other? If so, then what does this value look and sound and feel like inside and outside these walls?

When our view is multi-dimensional, we see many truths existing at once, all the while situated in relationships with each other, but in the end, the onus is upon each of us to step back and look at the big picture. We must examine our own attitudes and behaviors and what we are bringing into our shared spiritual community. As a doctrine-free religion, each one of us is called to draw upon our inherent intelligence; the goodness and compassion which manifest within our relationships; and, a simple trust that each of us is bringing our best self to every moment. These small leaps of faith are a vital part of a healthy individual and collective spirit.

Another essential ingredient for a healthy spirit is the ability to be humble.

If we are unable to humble ourselves, we can become vulnerable, to put it in a traditional term, to false idols. False idols serve to placate and nothing more. For example, the idolization of the Almighty Dollar has corrupted so much of the spiritual foundation necessary for individual economic security because the goal has become the accumulation of stuff above all else. I believe this false security is contributing to a widespread spiritual crisis among too many souls. There is a reason that old adage still exists: money can't buy true happiness – economic security is one thing, accumulation of stuff for no moral reason is another.

We need to trust our own innate intelligence as well as the divine goodness – that fundamental impulse to love first -- within not just our own heart, but within the hearts of our friends and neighbors – no matter how thick the layers of society's sticky trappings are between us. Nature survives because of diversity, and contrary to too much popular belief, so does humanity.

Now is the time for a deeper level of understanding, that as world citizens we each have a responsibility to respond in love not in competition and fear. Each of us must take responsibility

for living the values of compassion and forgiveness and not just pay lip service to them. We must ask ourselves the hard questions like how can I strike up a conversation and actually be open with someone whose political or religious beliefs are so very different than mine? To not shy away from the possibility of change within my own heart?

To actually value each person, no matter the degree of difference between us, will allow our intrinsic ability to be healthy to happen, and in so doing, we will be helping to heal our collective spiritual malaise. To engage all our values, not just the easy ones, is soul-work and it is incumbent upon each of us to not only be deeply honest, but to be brave.

Only by this type of soul work, will we find different answers to the question, ‘how can we fix that which is causing so much harm? How can we evolve the human systems which help us to live together in the balancing act of life so we truly share the risk, the prosperity, the pain, the beauty, and the future?’ After all, the earth belongs to all living creatures, not just a self-selected few.

Why is it so many visitors to our UU churches don’t come back? How does an candid spiritual honesty inform what we say, how we say it, and most importantly, how we listen and truly hear each other? I believe with all my heart, to be the best Unitarian Universalists we can be is an excellent way to care for not just our own, but for All Souls, with a capital S.