

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network  
SMALL GROUP SESSION  
**“WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT THE SOUL, THE SELF, AND THE SPIRIT”**  
Rev. Glenn H. Turner, UU Small Group, Auburn, Maine

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

“Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are.”

— José Saramago <[http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1285555.Jos\\_Saramago](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1285555.Jos_Saramago)>, Blindness  
<<http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3213039>>

MEDITATION

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

What you share may be about your physical or spiritual health, cares or concerns for loved ones, issues you are facing.

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted, for five minutes each, if there is time remaining, additional sharing and responses are welcome.

FOCUS: “WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT THE SOUL, THE SELF, AND THE SPIRIT”

For the Unknown Self

by John O'Donohue <<http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/O/ODonohueJohn/index.html>>

When people talk about the soul, or the spirit, it is often with a sense of something which is both mysterious and elusive. Most of us prefer something fairly straightforward. John Donahue writes that:

"So much of what delights and troubles you  
Happens on a surface  
You take for ground."

In other words, our senses connect us with what seems solid and real.

“Your mind,” he says, “thinks your life alone.”

Thinking my life alone, I sense again a concrete, separate self taking measure of its surroundings. Echoes of Descartes here: “I think, therefore I am.”

Donahue shifts our focus:

“Yet it seems that a little below your heart  
There houses an unknown self  
Who prefers the patterns of the dark  
And is not persuaded by the eye’s affection  
Or caught by the flash of thought.”

This shadowy part of ourselves is not, as he expresses it, “drawn to break into light.” On the surface, you entangle yourself with unworthiness - and, without reference to that unknown self, you “misjudge what you do and who you are.”

We catch glimpses of its inner workings in moments when we are “enchanted by twilight” not “recognizing the falling night.” I imagine that mood as being captured or captivated by something mysteriously other rather than being in control. It comes out of “the under-earth” of our “visible lives.”

Donahue continues:

"All you do and say and think is fostered  
Deep in its opaque and prevenient clay."

The word “prevenient” is an old theological concept going back to Arminius and John Wesley. It suggests that though we carry the sin of Adam, there is a divine grace which precedes our actions, and which allows us the free will that will allow us the freedom to choose the good.

"All you do and say and think is fostered  
Deep in its opaque and prevenient clay."

"It dwells in a strange, yet rhythmic ease  
That is not ruffled by disappointment;  
It presides in a deeper current of time  
Free from the force of cause and sequence  
That otherwise shapes your life."

If this deeper spirit “were to break forth into day,  
Its dark light might quench your mind,  
For it knows how your primeval heart  
Sisters every cell of your life  
To all your known mind would avoid.”

I think of Emerson musing about how thoughts came out of his head, and words came into his mouth from he knew not where, constraining him at every moment to acknowledge a power greater than his own. “We are wiser,” he said, “than we know.” Emerson also was wresting with the concept of divine inspiration. Wondering about the mysterious process of the soul.

"Thus it knows to dwell in you gently,  
Offering you only discrete glimpses  
Of how you construct your life.  
At times, it will lead you strangely,  
Magnetized by some resonance  
That ambushes your vigilance.

It works most resolutely at night  
As the poet who draws your dreams,  
Creating for you many secret doors,  
Decorated with pictures of your hunger;

It has the dignity of the angelic  
That knows you to your roots,  
Always awaiting your deeper befriending  
To take you beyond the threshold of want,  
Where all your diverse strainings  
Can come to wholesome ease."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Does the idea that we have a spirit or a soul have meaning to you? How would you describe it?
2. What nourishes your soul? What diminishes your soul or your spirit?
3. We think we have a self, though Buddhists would raise questions about that. Does your sense of self limit you? What about the idea that whoever would lose his life would gain it? How does that relate to the inner promptings of your soul?
4. Is there anything mysterious about the idea of a spirit or a soul? How is thinking about “soul” or “spirit” metaphorically helpful in building character?

## LIKES AND WISHES

How did this session go for you? Is there anything you'd like to call particular attention to?

## CLOSING WORDS:

“There is a light in this world, a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force when there is suffering, too much pain. Then suddenly, the spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people who hear a call and answer in extraordinary ways.”

— Mother Teresa <[http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/838305.Mother\\_Teresa](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/838305.Mother_Teresa)>

In the spirit of the Christmas season, may we deepen our own souls by opening our hearts and responding to the hopes and needs of ordinary people.