

“How is it with your soul”

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How is it with your soul? I'm a friend you haven't seen for a while. We run into each other at the Stop & Shop. We share a hug and a smile. Then we step back, I look you in the eyes, and ask, “How is it with your soul?” What's your gut response?

“Oh my God, what happened? I haven't seen her for a while. Did she go off the deep end? Will tracts come next? Will she start to tell me how she's turned her life around, because of...?”

Why not instead, “Hi, [name], how're ya doin'?” I haven't seen you for such a long time. What's up?” So much simpler. You were really in a hurry. So many items on your shopping list that day, so many to-do's tugging at you, and this was just the greeting to get you off the hook. You didn't have to agree to coffee or heaven forbid, lunch. It was all noncommittal, rather like your friendship—a generous term, perhaps for the nature of your connection, but an easy connection it was. What's this business about, “How is it with your soul?”

Let's revisit how it was asked?

[Hyper earnest] How is it with your soul?

Okay, I might back up too.

Or, was it almost flip, like a joke: “How is it with your soul? Just kidding... What's up? I haven't seen you for a while.”

Or was it, “Hi, [name]. I haven't seen you for so long. How's life going for you? How is it with your soul?”

Hmm... There's a prologue to the big question. You're startled, but you think twice. You pause—that precious moment when your consciousness just might turn on a dime—and you wonder, “How IS it with my soul?” She's not trying to convert me. She's not trying to mess with my mind. She really wants to know what's stirring in my center. This is rare.

Hear the echo of those words of Steven Smith:

“Everywhere we go we take our souls with us.
And every time we meet someone we wrap a little
piece of our souls around them
and pass it through them.”

So perhaps this “everywhere” includes the Stop & Shop. It’s not as if I’ve brought my soul in my wallet, ready to pop it out as I move through the check-out line, in the same way I rummage through my wallet to find that card that will give me every possible discount.

What if said person you encountered in the supermarket did pause and then drew upon what WAS stirring in her soul and began to speak a portion of her essence...slowly, haltingly, ponderously, in fragments that perhaps made more sense poetically than logically? Would I be ready to hear it? Would I pause also? Would I let all that might occupy my peripheral perspective melt into the visual/audible/soulful connection that I had invited? I would have no right to ask such a question without readiness to do exactly that.

There’s soul food, soul music, soul that describes a dimension of everyday life but casts a cultural tinge to it. In this country, that cultural tinge tends to be racially tinged. I wonder why. Perhaps by “soul food,” we’re talking about food that embodies the spirit of a segment of culture that feels intensely real. Perhaps by “soul food,” we’re talking about music that sounds with melody and lyrics that are undeniably authentic.” These are my white-woman guesses, my limited experience of receiving what most profoundly feeds a people and sometimes profoundly feeds me.

It’s another matter when we ponder soul as a noun, as a something that is neither edible nor audible nor tangible nor palpable. Likewise, soul cannot be reduced to a theological construct. Nor can it be cast into the amorphous cauldron that we call “spiritual.” It’s evasive and intimate, ephemeral and grounding, provocative and evocative. For the ancient Hebrews, one’s name became one’s essence. “I am who I am,” God is said to have responded to Abraham’s bewilderment in the presence of the burning bush.

In the Book of Exodus, we read that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, minding his own business, when an angel appeared to him in the midst of a bush that was burning but not consumed. That would be enough to startle any of us out of our wits. Moses walked toward the bush, and God spoke to him. “...Do not come near; take your shoes off, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Terrified, Moses hid his face. The voice continued to emerge from the flaming bush, a mysterious presence calling the dumfounded Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt into freedom. Moses’ rational self surfaced:

“If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” (Exodus 3:1-14)

I AM WHO I AM is, in Hebrew, an acronym, spoken only as YAHWEH. The full name of God was deemed by the people of Israel too holy to utter as anything other than an acronym. I wonder if I AM WHO I AM is the sanctuary that we are offered by the divine spark within us, a sanctuary of identity that we might also call our soul.

How is it with your soul? It's a question that crosses all socially appropriate boundaries. What chutzpah to pose such a question! How dare Moses ask the very NAME, the very essence, of the holy of holies! Whoever inquires about the essence of another human creature both manifests sacred chutzpah AND stands on holy ground, the holy ground of connection so beyond the parameters of social protocol that we instinctively back up, mortified, drawing instantly a line between our inner sanctum of identity and whomever would dare to ask that we open that door.

Yet... there is a deep yearning in each of us to reveal who we are beyond the, "Oh, I'm fine!" So too there is a competing reticence in each of us to reveal how it really is with that inner sanctum. To what extent might I even be aware of and attuned to how it is with my soul?

What is a soul anyway? Surely a construct that defies definition. Have you ever seen a soul, heard a soul, tasted a soul, felt a soul? Soul defies the senses. Have you ever experienced a soul? Perhaps.

"There's a river flowin' in my soul," we sang moments ago.

"Comfort me, comfort me, comfort me, oh my soul," we've sung time and again.

"Return again, return again. Return to the home of your soul," flow other lyrics, lyrics of invitation to come to your center:

*"Return to who you are, Return to what you are,
Return to where you are born and reborn again."*

"Soul is the font of who we are,"

writes Thomas Moore, in his iconic work, *Care of the Soul*.

"Soul is the font of who we are, and yet it is far beyond our capacity to devise and to control. We can cultivate, tend, enjoy, and participate in the things of the soul, but we can't outwit it or manage it or shape it to the designs of a willful ego."

That is, we can't play games with our essence. We can't do mind tricks with that font of our being. We can't mold it to the shape of our heart on any particular day. We might have a heavy heart. We might have a light heart. But who has a heavy soul or a light soul? It just *is*.

To inquire how it is with the soul of a friend, a spouse, a child, and most assuredly a stranger, is to presume a potential intimacy with the core of this other, such that the other's otherness would dissolve upon an authentic response, a response "from the soul."

When we're stirred deeply, we might say that we're stirred in "the bones of our soul." Hear the words of poet Mary Oliver, the first stanza in her poem, "Bones:"

“Understand, I am always trying to figure out
 what the soul is,
 and where hidden,
 and what shape—

and so, last week,
 when I found on the beach
 the ear bone
 of a pilot whale that may have died

hundreds of years ago, I thought
 maybe I was close to discovering something—
 for the ear bone

is the portion that lasts longest
 in any of us, man or whale...”

Yes, it’s a metaphor, but soul itself may be a metaphor for that proclamation, “I am who I am.” YAHWEH, too holy to be uttered except in the form of an acronym, signaled perhaps an instinctive reticence to reveal essence.

One of my favorite figures in the history and lore of our faith, Henry David Thoreau, recorded in his journal: “If I am not I, who will be?” Such claim was not the same as revealing the essence of his “I,” but in his playful, ponderous, and spontaneous conversations with friends and most especially children, he did readily reveal his “I.”

“We know intuitively,” writes Moore, “that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. ...Soul is revealed,” continues Moore, “in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy.”

“How is it with your soul?” invites and invokes complexity, a dance between the apparent opposites of a self shielded and a self shared, a tension between stirring and stillness.

Let go of your shopping list. Hush your to-do’s. Let the silence be an invitation to a better offer. How *is* it with your soul? You need not respond except to yourself. *How* you respond can open the gates of possibility for being who you are in the bones of your soul as you walk on the holy ground of your life.

So may it be and Amen.

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