

**KNOW THY SOUL -
An Ugly Duckling's View**

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Unitarian Universalist Church - St Petersburg, Florida

READINGS (printed after sermon)

Invocation	adapted from the Gospels of John & Matthew
Meditation	from the <i>Book of Genesis</i> & a Ute Native American prayer
Reading #1	from <i>The Tree: A Natural History</i> by Colin Tudge
Reading #2	from <i>The Meaning of Human Existence</i> by E.O. Wilson
Benediction	<i>In Fare Well</i> (after the Ute Native American prayer)

SERMON

I would guess that everyone here has been asked, "Who are you?" and that you answered, at least at first, with your name - like, "I'm Jack Donovan." It's a way we identify.

And I would guess that everyone here, as a child, was asked, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" and that you answered by saying what kind of vocation you intended – movie star, rock star, rocket star, etc. Another way of identifying.

But were you ever asked, "What are you?"

That's more a matter of characterization than identification. The questioner is asking, I think, "What can I expect of you?" To similar questions in my childhood, I was taught to answer, "I am Roman Catholic," "I'm American," "I'm Mr. and Mrs. Donovan's son." Religion, nationality, family characterizations.

But one of my childhood Unitarian best friends who had a strong animalist perspective, maybe because his father was the town veterinarian, tended to press us further with questions like, "Yes, but what are you?" I would answer, "Human." And he would likely say, "No, you're a monkey!" – and then provide evidence from his father's science.

Then another Unitarian best friend, of a practical philosophy bent perhaps because his father was a business school professor and his mother was an open-minded genius, would typically focus us with something like, "Yes, but

really, what is a human being?" My answer was only a raised eyebrow and the other friend still insisted, "Monkey!"

Still another of our Unitarian best friends is the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In these discussions, she would bless us with those warm gray Emerson eyes and then, perhaps because she was an Emerson, she set us to wondering with, "Yes, and what can we become?"

That was a question we Peter Pans did our best to ignore. We were all in the confusion stage of life, like the young prince of Denmark, Hamlet, when the spying sycophant Polonius advised him, "To thine own self be true and thereby be false to no one." But was not Hamlet's tragic youthful deficiency that he did not yet know who he was or to what or to whom to be true?

So for him, tragedy; and the state of Denmark, rotting. Everything sacred betrayed by everything sacred. It seems the Bard often shakes this point at us, that humans tend not to ponder what they are and so know not what they could or should become.

This, I think, is the also point of the Hans Christian Anderson's Ugly Duckling story, another hugely popular drama from Denmark centered on the question of character. The ugly duckling was hatched in someone else's nest – perhaps you know that feeling, of just being in the wrong box. Immediately, Ugly Duckling did not fit in. Its nestmates and barnyard fellows would not welcome it into their numbers. It wandered alone and miserable, staying just barely alive. Then one day it saw a flock of beautiful swans and when the flock saw the ugly duckling, they recognized what it was – a lost beautiful little swan, whom they welcomed home and who thereafter flew safely with the flock, happy ever after. Not a tragedy this time.

Finding out what you are and learning how you can best live: probably every human culture has had a story that addressed what humans are. Some of those stories have shed light on our potentials and set people free to pursue happiness. Some of those stories have emphasized our dark limitations and bound us down. You have probably heard a few of both.

I remember when I was a young Roman Catholic. The priests and nuns lectured into us what we were. They said, and I quote from memory, "You – we all – are God's creation as perfect holy souls. But from the moment of your bodily conception your soul is fallen from that state of grace. It is impaired by innate human sin – original sin. Inevitably what you choose

offends God, and you know it. You can be saved from hellfire only by grace through Christ.”

That was it. Our choice. The true church and doctrine, or hellfire.

Sometimes they also told us heresies of which to beware – false teachings that paved the way to hell. For example, some heretics believed that the soul that God implants in us remains perfect and holy and divine and ready for heaven if only we can see through our bodily life and the wayward world.

That was one heresy. They really didn't mention too many more, because why dwell on falsehood. Yet you could stumble on heresies by accident. For example, one day as a young adult, I re-read the Declaration of Independence. What I had not seen before is that the Declaration is also a belief statement. It includes a belief, an idea, that approaches the scientific - that Nature is a force in our creation. The Declaration ties God into Nature's ways, not above it. It characterizes human beings as able and right and obliged to choose their course to safety and happiness, aided by church doctrine if they want, but not constrained by it.

This idea influenced an unfolding epiphany for me about what humans are and why it matters. I am guessing you have had such awakenings, too? If true religion is about what bonds us in thriving relationship, then the Declaration's ideas are profoundly religious.

This scientific-philosophical-theological thinking poured into American culture and was carried forward in the next generations by the Unitarian Transcendentalists. They were taking the age-old question “What are humans?” and joining it to the lesser known but related revolutionary question, “What do we have the potential to become?”

To some degree we humans learn about our potentials naturally and often unconsciously, from observing and imitating the ways of our parents, communities, and societies. Sometimes contact with mentors or other cultures prompts growth in understanding our potentials. Sometimes we discover potential out of curiosity-driven study, or through spiritual practices that enhance our capacity for concern and kindness in wider circles of community and world.

Even now at this moment, science, art, friendship, and mindfulness are deepening what humankind knows about earthkind and the potentials of our beings. We know, roughly speaking, that the energy-matter we call the light emerged seemingly spontaneously from a singularity we have yet to understand. We know it began to compound into many forms of carbon,

hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur like fire, water, earth and air, then emerging as life that by genetic mutation and natural selection became plants and animals and us. We know the life-forms evolved many potentials as strategies to survive and thrive in the niches of the world environment.

We also know that, through this evolutionary process, we have come to be able to walk, make tools, use speech, decipher intentions, resist danger, grow food, analyze experiences, imagine futures, plan goals, solve problems, cooperate and care for one another, and experience delight. These are some of the potentials by which we may survive and thrive. For me, this is a better definition of the soul – the seed of sperm and egg containing all our potentials, passed to us from light to life, from plants to animals, each potential telling us what we are and what we yet can be.

And yet, in Walt Whitman's 150 year old words, we still ask, "Where is what we set out for so long ago; and why is it yet unfound?" Neither in the mass of men or women nor as societies have we found the way to safety and happiness for all souls.

Scientists, like evolutionary psychologist E. O. Wilson and cellular biologist Ursula Goodenough, whom we have studied here, suggest we need to develop and master a process by which the energy in the part of the brain that causes fight or flight can be transferred and transformed by the part of the brain that acts to bring insight and delight. Neuroscientists in partnership with Buddhist mindfulness practitioners are working together on such ways. Even some politicians are in the chase.

Can knowing more fully what we are as creatures – with potentials evolved over eons - help us develop new ways to more universally become the best we can become – mindful, helpful, thriving. I think so.

We have long and rightly applauded ourselves about being the problem-solving species. Equally long, we have deluded ourselves about not being the problem-causing species. But in seeing our potentials more clearly, will we not more clearly see ways past the delusions and incompetencies that subvert our potentials?

A closing remembrance: I remember sitting in a Harvard Square coffee shop decades ago with my Unitarian friends, still in our youngish adulthood. One was a new veterinarian, carrying on his father's practice of caring for animals great and small. He still is. One was beginning as a staff analyst for the U.S. Senate's Committee on Agriculture and Environment. He's just now finishing the editing of a collection of essays on the impact of climate change for the World Bank. One was heading off to marriage, legal practice,

and later to motherhood. She and her husband shuttle back and forth now, tending vineyards of grapes and orchards of olives in Italy and farming fields of wheat back home in Concord.

The question, I think, in all our minds back then, with perhaps varying degrees of clarity, was the Emersonian Unitarian question: "What are we and what can we become. What influences our beings from ancient times and today?" All four of us are still learning and still becoming, and hoping the same for all of you whom we cherish and in whom our children and yours place hope. And me - I am blest by knowing my Concordians and by being here with you. In a real way, I believe, all the potentials of our souls are still in the beginning.

Happy High Holy Days!

READINGS

Invocation (*Men; Women*) Gospels of John & Matthew (adapted)

What has come into being is life,

and life is the light of all people.

*All who accept the light and trust in it
receive the power to be children of the light.*

**The light becomes flesh and lives in us,
and we receive its grace and truth, grace upon grace.**

It has been said, we are the light of the world.

**May our light shine on others in word and deed,
so all may care for the light in all.**

Meditation from *The Book of Genesis* & a Ute Native American prayer

At the beginning, there was formless void and darkness.

Then the Being of beings conceived, "Light" and there was light, and the first day.

Then, "Waters and sky," and it was so and a second day.

Then, "Earth and vegetation," and a third day.

Then, "Stars and sun and moon," and a fourth day.

Then, "Creatures of sea and sky," and a fifth day.

Then, "Creatures of the earth

with humankind like me, empowering all Earthkind," and so a sixth day.

And on the seventh day the Being of beings rested.

And now we say,

Earth teach me attention like grass in morning light.

Earth teach me caring like parent with only child.

Earth teach me courage like tree who stands alone.

Earth teach me limits like ant who crawls along.

Earth teach me freedom like eagle among clouds.

Earth teach me resignation like leaf in fall.

Earth teach me rebirth like seed in spring.

Earth teach me empowerment like snow on river.

Earth teach me thanks like dry fields in rain.

Earth teach me peace like a moment of quiet.

Reading #1 from *The Tree: A Natural History* by Colin Tudge

The bulk of all flesh is compounded from carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulfur. The simple elements, suitably arranged, can give rise to living things. All of life's requirements – metabolism, reproduction, and the business of getting along with others – are difficult. Each creature must solve life's problems in its own way.

Reading #2 from *The Meaning of Human Existence* by E.O. Wilson

The creation of groups from personal and intimate mutual knowledge was the unique achievement of humanity and has made *Homo Sapiens* the first fully dominant species in Earth's history. In the forging of advanced social behavior, the evolutionary products are:

One, the intense, even obsessive interest of people in other people;

Two, the overpowering instinctual urge to belong to groups.

Human beings are not wicked by nature. We have enough intelligence, goodwill, generosity, and enterprise to turn Earth into a paradise. The problem holding everything up thus far is that *Homo sapiens* is an innately dysfunctional species. We are hampered by the Paleolithic Curse: People find it hard to care about other people beyond their own tribe or country or group, and even then past one or two generations. It is harder still to be concerned about other animal species.

Our brains are poorly wired. An individual's selfish activity within the group provides competitive advantage, but is commonly destructive to the group as a whole. The internal conflict in conscience is not the presence of good and evil tearing at one another in our breasts. It is a biological trait fundamental to understanding the human condition, and necessary for survival of the species. We need to understand ourselves in both evolutionary and psychological terms in order to plan a more rational, catastrophe-proof future. We must learn to behave.

Benediction *In Fare Well* (after the Ute Native American prayer)

In farewell:

May friends teach us;

May foes teach us;

May our souls and all souls teach us;

May our animal companions & gardens & fields & forests teach us;

May the waters and soils and air teach us;

May the light teach us.

May we have peace and joy.