

## SOUL SEARCHING: THE RUPERT SYNDROME, AND THE SNOWFLAKE FACTOR

*In secret depths you knit my frame,  
Before my birth you spoke my name;  
Within my soul, as close as breath,  
So near to me, in life, in death.*

*The Lone Wild Bird*, Southern Harmony, 1835  
Added verse by songwriter, Marty Haugen

The new parent of every newborn typically begins choosing a name long before the child draws its first breath. The definition of when life begins may be a matter of debate, but the beginnings of an assigned identity certainly predates birth. By the time one comes into this world, the uniqueness of each individual – as well as the common characteristics of a particular combined gene pool – have done its job.

Beyond that, some of us even delight in the notion some divine creative force of all that is came up with an original idea every time, long before we were even a twinkle in our parent's eyes; so that the first nursery rhyme implanted in the subconscious of the nubile psyche might go a little like, "My, oh my, how special am I!"

Before our first daughter was born, her mother and I went through the typical search for a unique name that would appropriately express how special our little creature would be. After weeding through all the baby books, we ended up scanning an index of biblical names, and came up with King David's first wife, *Michal*.

We figured the subsequent confusion over spelling and gender in her early years would only add to her individual uniqueness. We were right.

I was more normally named after my two grandfathers, John Arthur and Floyd William. So (mercifully), I'm John William. Hey, it could have gone the other way. But no matter, while I have

certainly carved out an identity for myself over the span of a lifetime distinct from anyone else, there are times when I look at old family photos with the inescapable reality that the apple does not fall far from the tree.

My hunch is that it is this one-of-a-kind originality and the development of the super ego that contributes in large measure to our sometimes wishful thinking and believing we are little lower than the angels; and that something that is essentially *me*, and *me alone*, ought to have a stake in some form of immortality.

It is commonly accepted that a healthy ego develops in such a way that we become enabled and empowered to withstand the forces of fate and fortune that would otherwise whittle us down to a mere shell of our would-be selves; beyond what we come to know of ourselves that might expose us as being as ordinary and mundane, as everyone else.

In the grand scheme of things, we like to believe there is something more to our finite, temporal being. I'd like to think I am more than my physical, cognitive and emotive components. I am a part of something greater than the sum of my parts; and *that* part, I'd like to believe, is a part of an eternal whole. Not only are we imbued with a divine spark and spiritual reality; but that *that* part of me is something that, once created, will never cease to exist in some form or fashion.

My ego has healthy aspirations. I am not just a lump of clay, formed of the earth; and to which my earthly remains will one day return. Thus, with mythic language as good as any to describe the majesty and mystery of creation, God breathed *ruach* (*Hebrew*), spirit, into Adam's inanimate form, and he became a living creature. So marvelous a feat was it, it seems one can hardly conceive of the idea that some *spiritual residual* wouldn't survive the grave for all eternity.

In simpler terms, this is what people sometimes refer to as the soul. And, the whole idea of the soul is not only all tied up in the need to prove its very existence, but its immortal nature, as well.

## I. SOUL SEARCHING

Every religious tradition attempts to address the basic question everyone asks, and to which none has an adequate answer in the end; since no one really knows, and no one can prove with any real sense of cognitive or experiential certainty. Instead, lots of religious posturing sometimes leaves us with some *illusion* of certainty, in one form or another.

But in doing so, it also leaves us bereft of what I would suggest is the only legitimate justification for any worthwhile religion; that is, to ultimately leave us *comfortable with the spiritual quest of unknowing*. It's that willing inclination, or hunch, that is more commonly referred to simply as *faith*.

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Unfortunately, most religious enterprises indulge in just the opposite endeavor; sometimes with fierce and deadly consequences. Systematic dogmas and doctrines are constructed to peddle an illusion of certainty about where you can park your eternal soul safely and securely; where a reckless kind of ultimate trust isn't necessary, as long as you hold to a certain set of beliefs.

In ancient India it was the atman that was said to be this eternal part of human existence; which would transmigrate and endlessly reincarnate itself in a continuum (*samsara*) of birth, death and rebirth.

The Buddha understood a permanent self or soul was composed of five ever-changing components: the material sensate world, feelings, perceptions, emotions and

consciousness. Together, these five components were believed to create an illusion of a fixed identity and continuous self (*skandhas*). The Buddha added this qualifier, however: it is our clinging to this fixed self that creates all the unnecessary suffering this world.

In the tradition of Jewish scripture, there is a similar all-encompassing sense of the life principle (*nephesh*), that is usually translated as *soul*. It is the seat of spiritual as well as physical needs and cravings, including one's need for a sense of the holy. "Bless the Lord, oh my soul," the psalmist sings. "And all that is within me, bless his holy name."

But here's an important point: When the Hebrew word for "soul" is used, nothing more than the person as such – as a human being – is meant. The death of the *nephesh*, then, results in the loss of personhood. The soul is not something we possess as though the person existed outside of the "soul." The "soul" *is* the person. The "soul" is what each person is as a human being. The Jewish scriptures say nothing about any pre-existence or immortality of the *nephesh*, the soul.

In the New Testament the Greek word translated as "soul" is *psyche*. Again, it denotes one's inner life or actual personhood. God, who has created the "soul," can also destroy it. Jesus is attributed with having differentiated between body and psyche, but that both are destructible: "Be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." [Matthew 10:28].

Elsewhere in Matthew Jesus is attributed posing the distinction, "what good will it do if you acquire the whole world but forfeit your life (soul)? Or what will you give in exchange for your life (soul)?" [Matthew 16:26] But the challenging choice was likely in the context of the early Church suffering persecution and followers were literally faced with life and death allegiances that the question of ultimate importance and one's relationship to God took on fresh relevance; where following the one they called the Christ by bearing their own cross was the better bargain than "acquiring the whole world," at the cost of "forfeiting one's (true) soul , or life.

The Hebrew word in Jewish scripture for “spirit,” (or “wind” or “breath” -- *ruach*), and the New Testament Greek word *pneuma* are often used in similar ways to describe the animated make-up of a human being, particularly in its relationship to God. But contrary to much of what is taken for granted in modern, everyday Christianity, there is, at best, nothing more than contradictory evidence in the biblical tradition that suggests any *immortal* nature to the soul.

So where does this idea come from? Again, my hunch is that it comes from something innate in our constitutional make-up. It is a fundamental part of our human nature to have this longing – a sometimes *desperate, even prideful desire* -- to want to believe, even try to prove, that something of what is uniquely *me* will live forever.

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In the empirical age in which we have said to have “found” ourselves, scientific inquiry has often replaced this very human temptation which traditional religions try to address; setting out to prove or disprove, once and for all, what we can claim to believe about an immortal soul with verifiable certainty.

In 1907, a physician name Duncan MacDougall from Haverhill, Massachusetts, set out to not only prove the existence of the human soul, but that it had a physical presence and substance, much like the heart and lungs, flesh, bone and blood. With the use of a large scale he recorded the weight of terminally ill patients at the moment of death, and discerned a drop of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an ounce. He deduced the fleeting soul not only existed, but left the body for who knows where, weighing a mere 21 grams.

While such an exercise might seem primitive and downright silly to us moderns, the same

scientific quest remains, undeterred. More often than not it has attempted to prove the *non*-existence of anything like an immortal soul.

A few years back, columnist David Brooks wrote a piece entitled “Neural Buddha.” Earlier, the “the militant materialism” of the genetic and neuroscience revolutions had advanced the assertion that the idea of a human spirit might exist apart from the body was just ridiculous. It went like this:

Everything arises from atoms. Genes shape temperament. Brain chemicals shape behavior. Assemblies of neurons create consciousness. Free will is an illusion. Human beings are “hard-wired” to do this or that. Religion is an accident. In this materialist view, people perceive God’s existence because their brains have evolved to confabulate belief systems. Everything is material and “the soul is dead.”

But then things began to change again, with the flip-flop of further scientific inquiry. As Brooks observed,

Over the past several years, the momentum has shifted away from hard-core materialism. The brain seems less like a cold machine. It does not operate like a computer. Instead, meaning, belief and consciousness seem to emerge mysteriously from idiosyncratic networks of neural firings. Those squishy things called emotions play a gigantic role in all forms of thinking. Love is vital to brain development. Researchers now spend a lot of time trying to understand universal moral intuitions. Genes are not merely selfish, it appears. Instead, people seem to have deep instincts for fairness, empathy and attachment. ... This new wave of research will not seep into the public realm in the form of militant atheism. Instead it will lead to what you might call “neural Buddhism.”

First, the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of relationships. Second, underneath the patina of different religions, people around the world have common moral intuitions. Third, people are equipped to experience the sacred, to

have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love. Fourth, God can best be conceived as the nature one experiences at those moments, *the unknowable total of all there is.*

*Neural Buddha*, David Brooks, Op-Ed, NYT, May 13, 2008

Somehow it does not surprise me that science has religiously tried to do what traditional religious thought has tried and failed to do since the moment Adam took his first breath; and then got tossed out of Eden on his ear. But I just wonder if -- when it comes to all the myriad ideas of a soul, and all the religious and scientific debates over its existence and immortal nature -- *we've just been fixated on the wrong questions.*

The more illuminating question may be to ask, *what does it matter?* Seriously, what does it matter? In the far, far greater scheme of things, known and unknown, what does it matter? This is, I believe, a fundamental question of faith; about trusting in something *more*, and suggests our own immortality is of little consequence to the eternity of "all there is."

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As a good reminder of all this, the other day I read a piece by the essayist Harry T. Cook, entitled "Perspective." It's a good summation, not unlike other "big picture" views we've probably all periodically considered; and a good place to return, and start over with our thinking:

The universe has been around for 14 billion years -- that's 14,000,000,000. By some accounts, the Big Bang wasn't an explosion of stuff in space but an explosion of nothing into the concepts and substance that have become everything that is and will be. From that microsecond on have been produced innumerable galaxies, suns, planets, comets, asteroids, meteors, meteorites, space

dust, sun spots and what appears to be a cosmic soup concocted of dark matter and antimatter roiling around in topless and bottomless vaults that may or may not be full to overflowing with what else we do not know and can barely guess at it.

Harry T. Cook, *Perspective*, July 22, 2011

Reading this perspective, I could almost hear the echoed refrain of the psalmist's line:

*When I look at your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars  
that you have established;  
what are human beings  
that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

Psalm 8

I think we normally read those lines, heartened, even flattered, by the notion that somehow we're deemed of such importance in the grand scheme of things. But instead, with a different, humbler perspective, I might do well to consider how *insignificant* I really am. As the essayist continues,

Here on the surface of this middling planet third of eight out from a minor star (not counting Pluto), we continue to write our headlines about conflicts over what gang of thugs will subjugate what people with what weapons at what price and to what end.

Harry T. Cook, *Perspective*, July 22, 2011

As if of equal gravitas and imbalance in perspective, additional recent headlines might include the Washington budget battles and the NFL squabbling over owners and player's million dollar splits, while the starvation of countless humans in the Horn of Africa continues unchecked; and perhaps even more telling, the financial fate of one 80 year old billionaire. Let's get a grip.

## II. THE RUPERT SYNDROME

When billionaire media mogul Rupert Murdoch recently sat down before British Parliament's Media, Culture and Sport Committee, he was quick to interject his personal predicament; assuring the outraged public and government

inquisitor's, muttering that – for the record -- last Wednesday, July 20, 2011, could go down in the annals of human history as “the most humble day” of his life.

Rupert misspoke. What I think he meant to say was that it was the most *humiliating* day of his life.

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By his own estimation, the phone hacking scandal by one of his tabloid newspaper had apparently not only jeopardized his accumulated success as a financial titan, but his personal psyche (soul), as well. With all the humility he could apparently muster, he vowed to clean up the mess others he'd entrusted to others.

Asked if he thought he was guilty of “willful blindness” – a legal term coined in the Enron debacle a decade ago, but might just as easily have been applied to this misbegotten exercise in self-examination, or soul searching – his son at his side replied on their joint behalf, no, not at all.

What wasn't asked was whether he believed there was any willful blindness leading up to this day of reckoning, and the tarnishing of his reputation. That is, were his own hands complicit or formative in shaping a company's culture he is said to have micro-managed; where tabloid journalism is propelled by justifying any means short of crossing over the thin line of legality, in order to dig up dirt to feed the public's insatiable appetite for the tawdry and inane? (Remember, if the soul comprises all there is to someone's essential “*me-ness*,” it includes the tawdry and inane in us, as well.)

In the end, was this “humbling” experience in a grandstand display of humility really more about the humiliation of Rupert's ego? Or would it lead to an introspective act of genuine *soul searching*; about who he was, who he wanted to be, and was the life he'd chosen to shape for himself for the first 83 years of his life the one he wanted to live out the rest of his days?

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Now, the *Rupert Syndrome* is hardly unique to Mr. Murdoch. We've all had our humiliating, embarrassing moments; when those parts of our lives we live in the shadows of our own self-acknowledgment get exposed to the light of day.

As Jesus is believed by most biblical scholars to have likely said in the same passage in Matthew's gospel mentioned above, “After all, there is nothing veiled that won't be unveiled, or hidden that won't be made known.” [Matthew 16:24] I call them “rooftop moments,” and they're pretty routine. So here's the thing, and it should be of some consolation to Rupert:

Since there's not much new under the sun, Rupert's humiliation, or my little embarrassing moments for that matter, aren't that original. In fact, the older we get, the more most of us come to realize (and possibly even accept with a little relief), they're a dime a dozen.

Thus, it is more a matter of humility than humiliation to acknowledge I'm not all that unique or different from anyone else. On the other hand, humiliation occurs when our cover is blown; when the pretense of being more brilliant, more successful, better than we really are peeled away and *our very soul* is left as naked and vulnerable as the day we were born.

Rupert Murdoch is a guy who's made millions peddling sleazy tabloid stories to millions of folks who are, in actuality, just like him, or me, or maybe even you! Where others see it as ironic that the king of the tabloids has had the tables turned and the scandal is all about *him*, in actuality there's nothing that could be more predictable. The *Rupert Syndrome* is only the last exposé in a never-ending succession of rooftop moments.

Given all this, I turn again to think about what the soul is really comprised of; that is, *all* of me.

And, if it's *all* a part of who I really am, I'd really just as soon leave it all behind: heart, body, mind and soul. I'd rather surrender it all to the wider, deeper mystery of (to adapt David Brook's phrase for God) "the unknowable total of all there is."

In fact, that's what I believe *soul searching* is all about. It's not the perpetual and elusive quest for some immortal validation of my own importance; but rather the humbler act that ventures beyond the need to believe in our own self-importance, let alone immortality; and trusts instead that "all there is" is more than little 'ol me can imagine or desire.

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I recognize the fact that this may be a different kind of soul searching for others. It is one that comes along later in the journey for some of us; and not everyone arrives at such a place. Younger days could not appreciate the subtler implication of such a perspective. But it has been evident from the start, I believe; at least for those who are willing to look beyond an otherwise shortsighted quest for immortality. Here's a simple way to look at it perhaps:

### III. THE SNOWFLAKE FACTOR

When I was a boy, growing up in Michigan, I remember the excitement that always came with the first snowfall of winter. It would always come somewhat unpredictably on some late, gray autumn day; when the morning frost had already curled the fallen leaves beneath our feet, and the earth was hard as stone.

The snowflakes would first appear only a few at a time, emerging almost imperceptibly at first out of the gray-white sky overhead. Then gradually the swirling tempo would pick up, thickening the

air and dusting the landscape with fresh white powder.

We'd run outside, throw our heads back, and spin around in circles with our tongues sticking out; trying to catch as many flakes as we could as they'd fall and instantly melt in our mouths. I'd think to myself, just imagine, so many snowflakes, and no two alike!

But soon the snowfall would turn to a flurry, and the excitement would fade. We'd soon be reminded the season had only just begun, and the shortened days of shovels, galoshes and wet woolen mittens lay before us; when the cumulative snowfall would soon be measured in feet.

Given such a perspective, somehow the uniqueness of each one of those gazillion snowflakes didn't seem so special. And neither am I. But somehow, with nothing more than that and a hunch to go on, that's okay.

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