Finding Your Soul

Parker J. Palmer

At birth we each receive our own unique spiritual DNA, but life soon separates us from our true selves. Here's a path toward wholeness.

When my first grandchild was born, I saw something in her that I had missed in my own children some 25 years earlier, when I was too young and self-absorbed to see anyone, including myself, very well. What I saw was clear and simple: my granddaughter arrived on earth as this kind of person, rather than that, or that, or that.

As an infant, for example, she was almost always calm and focused, quietly absorbing whatever was happening around her. She looked as if she "got" everything — enduring life's tragedies, enjoying its comedies, and patiently awaiting the day when she could comment on all of it. Today, with her verbal skills well honed, this description still fits the teenager who is one of my best friends and seems like an "old soul."

In my granddaughter I actually observed something I could once take only on faith: We are born with a seed of selfhood that contains the spiritual DNA of our uniqueness — an encoded birthright knowledge of who we are, why we are here, and how we are related to others.

We may abandon that knowledge as the years go by, but it never abandons us. I find it fascinating that the very old, who often forget a great deal, may recover vivid memories of childhood, of that time in their lives when they were most like themselves. They are brought back to their birthright nature by the abiding core of selfhood they carry within — a core made more visible, perhaps, by the way aging can strip away whatever is not truly us.

Philosophers haggle about what to call this core of our humanity, but I am no stickler for precision. Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Quakers call it the inner teacher or the inner light. Humanists call it identity and integrity. In popular parlance, people often call it soul.

What we name it matters little to me, but that we name it matters a great deal. For "it" is the objective, ontological reality of selfhood that keeps us from reducing ourselves, or each other, to biological mechanisms, psychological projections, sociological constructs, or raw material to be manufactured into whatever society needs — diminishments of our humanity that constantly threaten the quality of our lives.

"Nobody knows what the soul is," says the poet Mary Oliver, "it comes and goes/like the wind over the water." But just as we can name the functions of the wind, so we can name some of the functions of the soul without presuming to penetrate its mystery:

- The soul wants to keep us rooted in the ground of our own being, resisting the tendency of other faculties, like the intellect and ego, to uproot us from who we are;
- The soul wants to keep us connected to the community in which we find life, for it understands that relationships are necessary if we are to thrive;
- The soul wants to tell us the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether that truth is easy or hard to hear;
- The soul wants to give us life and wants us to pass that gift along, to become life-givers in a world that deals too much death.

All of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form. But from the moment of birth onward, the soul or true self is assailed by deforming forces from without and within: by racism, sexism, economic injustice, and other social cancers; by jealousy, resentment, self-doubt, fear, and other demons of the inner life.

Most of us can make a long list of the external enemies of the soul, but often we conspire in our own deformation. For every external power bent on twisting us out of shape, there is a potential collaborator within us. When our impulse to tell the truth is thwarted by threats of punishment, it is because we value security over being truthful. When our impulse to side with the weak is thwarted by threats of lost social standing, it is because we value popularity over being a pariah.

The powers and principalities would hold less sway over our lives if we refused to collaborate with them. But refusal is risky, so we deny our own truth, take up lives of "self-impersonation," and betray our identities. The divided life comes in many and varied forms. To cite just a few examples, it is the life we lead when —

- We refuse to invest ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve;
- We make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it;
- We remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirits;
- We harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people;
- We hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change;
- We conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked.

Beyond Ethics

As I write, the media are filled with stories of people whose dividedness is now infamous. They worked at such places as Enron, Arthur Andersen, Merrill Lynch, WorldCom, and the Roman Catholic Church, to name a few. Surely these people heard an inner call to wholeness. But they became separated from their own souls, betraying the trust of citizens, stockholders, and the faithful — and making our democracy, our economy, and our religious institutions less trustworthy in the process.

These particular stories will soon fade from the front page, but the story of the divided life will be in the news forever. Its drama is perennial, and its social costs are immense. The poet Rumi said it with ruthless candor 800 years ago: "If you are here unfaithfully with us/ you're causing terrible damage."

Our current crisis is not a failure of ethics, as it is usually billed. It is a failure of human wholeness. Doctors who are dismissive of patients, politicians who lie to the voters, executives who cheat retirees out of their savings, clerics who rob children of their well-being — these people, for the most part, do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions. They doubtless took courses on professional ethics and probably received top grades. They gave speeches and sermons on ethical issues and more than likely believed their own words. But they had a well-rehearsed habit of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives.

Yet the soul persistently calls us back to our birthright form, back to lives that are grounded, connected, and whole. Only when the pain of our dividedness becomes more than we can bear do most of us embark on an inner journey toward living "divided no more."

Your Soul's Journey to Wholeness

All the great spiritual traditions want to awaken us to the fact that we help to create the reality in which we live. And all of them ask two questions that are intended to help keep us awake: **What are we sending from within ourselves out into the world, and what impact is it having "out there"? What is the world sending back at us, and what impact is it having "in here"?**

We are continually engaged in the evolution of self and world — and we have the power to choose, moment by moment, between that which gives life and that which deals death. In that give-and-take we experience the journey of the soul.

In order to explore the soul's journey, I need to ask you to make (or imagine making) a simple visual aid:

Take a letter-sized piece of paper, cut a half-inch strip down the long side, hang on to the strip, and throw the rest away. I apologize for this cheap, low-tech device, but I am a Quaker, and this is as close as we get to a PowerPoint presentation.

Let one side of that strip represent your outer or onstage life. Here the words that describe our experience are image, influence, and impact — words that name our hopes and fears as we interact with the world. Is anyone listening to me? Am I making any difference? And how do I look while I'm trying?

Let the other side of that strip represent your inner or backstage life. Here the vocabulary is less anxious and more reflective, with words like ideas, intuitions, feelings, values, faith — and, deeper still, whatever words you choose to name the source from which such things come: mind, heart, spirit, true self, soul, or place-beyond-all-naming.

The relation between our backstage and onstage lives unfolds, I suggest, through four phases.

Phase One: Birthright Wholeness

Phase one comes when we arrive in this world with no separation at all between our inner and outer life. This is why most of us love to be around infants and young children: What we see is what we get. Whatever is inside an infant comes immediately to the outside, both figuratively and literally! In the presence of a newly minted human being, I am reminded of what wholeness looks like. And I am sometimes moved to wonder, "Whatever became of me?" This phase requires no visual aid: We can see it all around us in the lives of the very young.

Phase Two: Raising the Wall

Our Quaker PowerPoint starts to become useful as we turn to phase two, that long life passage in which we build and buttress a barrier between inner truth and the outer world. So let that strip of paper — one end held in each hand, stretched out left to right at eye level, the flat surface facing you — represent the wall of separation we erect as we depart childhood en route to becoming adolescents and adults.

Some children, sadly, need this wall at home. Others do not need it until they get to school. But sooner or later, everyone needs a wall for the same reason: to protect our inward vulnerabilities against external threats. As it starts to dawn on us that the world is a dangerous place, we wall off the most fragile parts of ourselves — beliefs we hold, dimensions of our own identities — in hopes of protecting them, sometimes against great odds.

Phase Three: Getting Centered

True self will come to our rescue, if we let it. The divided life is pathological, so it always gives rise to symptoms — and if we acknowledge the symptoms, we may be able to treat the disease. In my case, it was clinical depression. Other people may feel aimless or anxious or agitated or angry. But at some point in phase two, having lived behind the wall for a while, most of us feel the pain of being alienated from our own truth. If we are willing to feel it and name it, instead of trying to numb it, this pain will crack our closed system open, forcing us out from behind the wall toward the healing vision of phase three.

In this phase, we reach for integration by reordering our onstage lives around our backstage values and beliefs, as can be illustrated with our Quaker PowerPoint. Take that strip of paper you were holding as a wall and join the ends together. The circle you have formed represents

the yearning that drives phase three: "I want my inner truth to be the plumb line for the choices I make about my life — about the work I do and how I do it, about the relationships I enter into and how I conduct them."

This is the yearning to be "centered," a word that is, I would guess, one of the most frequently encountered in the spiritual literature of recent decades. The desire to center our outer lives on inner truth is a step toward integrity, of course. But — as our visual aid reveals in a way words alone cannot — phase three has a shadow side. Hold that ring of paper horizontally, as if it were a corral, and you will see that "getting centered" could also be described as getting the wagons in a circle or moving into a gated community or creating a secret garden where we welcome only those with whom we feel at ease.

The shadow side of phase three arises when we use inner truth as a filter to exclude anyone or anything we find challenging. Real-world examples are common; witness the divisive role religion often plays in public life, where believers on both the left and the right separate the "good guys" from the "bad guys" along doctrinal lines. When we use our truth to create such divisions, we fall far short of the openhearted engagement with the world that all the great spiritual traditions advocate. Now the circle of phase three becomes no more than the wall of phase two in disguise.

Phase Four: Life on the Möbius Strip

Which brings us to the final phase in the relation of our onstage and backstage lives, where the Quaker PowerPoint becomes essential. Take that strip of paper you have been holding in the shape of a circle, pull the two ends slightly apart, give one end a half-twist, and then rejoin the two ends. You have just created a remarkable form called a Möbius strip.

Holding the strip together with the fingers of one hand, use a finger on the other hand to trace what seems to be the outside surface of that strip: suddenly and seamlessly you find yourself on what seems to be the inside of the strip. Continue to trace what seems to be the inside surface of the strip: suddenly and seamlessly you find yourself on what seems to be the outside of the strip.

I have to keep repeating "what seems to be" because on the Möbius strip, there is no "inside" and "outside" — the two apparent sides keep creating each other. The mechanics of the Möbius strip are mysterious, but its message is clear: Whatever is inside us continually flows outward to help form, or deform, the world — and whatever is outside us continually flows inward to help form, or deform, our lives. The Möbius strip is like life itself: here, ultimately, there is only one reality.

When we understand phase four in the relation of our onstage and backstage lives, we see that phases two and three are illusions — necessary illusions, perhaps, at certain points in our lives, but illusions nonetheless. We may fool ourselves into believing that we are hiding our truth behind a wall or using our truth to screen out what is alien to us. But whether we know it or not, like it or not, accept it or not, we all live on the Möbius strip all the time: there is no place to hide! We are constantly engaged in a seamless exchange between whatever is "out there" and whatever is "in here," participating in the creation of reality, for better or for worse.

Living Divided No More

In this fourth phase we see that we have only one choice: Either we walk the Möbius strip wide awake to its continual interchanges, learning to co-create in ways that are life-giving for ourselves and others, or we sleepwalk on the Möbius strip, unconsciously co-creating in ways that are dangerous and often death-dealing to relationships, to good work, to hope.

In phase four, we come full circle to the place where we began, for the Möbius strip is the adult version of the wholeness into which we were born. As T. S. Eliot famously said:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

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