

Becoming a Living Soul

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And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Genesis: 1:26; 2:7¹

I was born in 1960 and my formative years were spent worrying about the Vietnam War, race riots, and the nuclear threat. Too young to remember the Bay of Pigs invasion or the Cuban missile crisis, my earliest memory is John F. Kennedy's assassination. My sister and I were pulling our blocks out of the closet when our kiddy show was interrupted with the news of the president's death. We comforted my mother as she wept, not understanding the enormity of the loss for the nation, but feeling pain, sadness and confusion at our inability to make her feel better.

Within the next 10 years—by the time I was just thirteen years old—Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated, the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and Watts, Detroit and other cities had erupted into riots, four people were killed in the Kent State massacre, 58,000 American soldiers and two million Vietnamese had been killed in Vietnam, and over a million people had died in Biafra from starvation and war. Back then the nightly news didn't shelter us from reality. As a result, I had the images of the naked Vietnamese girl running down the street after a napalm attack, the photograph of the horrified young woman kneeling by one of the dead protesters in the Kent State massacre, and the starving Biafran children with distended stomachs and sunken eyes seared into my consciousness for eternity.

Sadly, my daughter was about the same age on September 11, 2001 as I was on the day JFK died. Will her first conscious memories be of airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center, of people choosing to jump to their deaths rather than remain trapped in towering infernos, of crumbling buildings and heroic rescue attempts? Will she be haunted by the continuous Technicolor loop of doom and destruction that appeared on our television screens for what seemed like months after the event? How will she process the fact that as a result of our heart-melting rage at the loss of American life on 9-11, 3,400 civilians died in the bombing of Afghanistan and ten thousand and counting innocent people have died in "Operation Iraqi Freedom?" Will the allegations of war crimes committed by the American military at Abu Ghraib prison, Guantanamo Bay and other secret locations across the globe, the gruesome accounts of the "Convoy of Death" in Afghanistan, and the reprehensible birth defects resulting from depleted uranium define her childhood the way the My Lai massacre, agent orange, landmines, and napalm defined mine?

As a species, we have manifested what we have concentrated our energies on; we have received what we have asked for. When we study the carnage that is human history up to the present it becomes obvious that we have become cogs in a death machine. Since the murder of over 200,000 mostly women and children in Hiroshima and Nagasaki we *know* that we have the ability to destroy ourselves completely, which separates our current horrors from the massacres, genocides and inquisitions of the past that were repulsive but localized and non-threatening to the total population of the planet. The dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 was our dress rehearsal for the apocalypse. We either take the last few steps toward total annihilation, or we try a different road. It's that simple.

The Hindu religion—humanity's oldest—has three gods that represent aspects of the Supreme Reality: Brahma, the creator, Shiva the destroyer, and Vishnu the preserver. Can we recognize our mastery of the Shiva role without forcing a final act? If we can, paths as creators and preservers—formerly only walked by bodhisattvas, sages and saints—beckon to be explored. But before we can move forward as creators and preservers, we must begin to see ourselves differently, not as human beings chained together on a death march, but as eternal spiritual beings, as living souls.

¹ *King James Bible* (American Bible Society, 1999).

It's hard to embrace God and the spiritual life when the distortion of religious teachings has either been the direct cause or served to fan the flames of hatred, separation and destruction from the beginning of time. But hopelessness and despair, no matter how rational a response to the human condition, only feeds the darkness, only encourages more death. The spiritual impulse is hardwired into our makeup as human beings. When we direct it inside ourselves we connect with our souls—the non-physical, internal aspect of our nature where our feelings and conscience exist side by side, the eternal secret sanctum that intersects with everyone and everything, the point where Divinity lives in each and every one of us.

All religions are fingers pointing at the moon and not the moon itself. Judaism and Islam are strictly monotheistic, Christianity and Hinduism each use a trinity to express different aspects of Divinity, and Buddhism doesn't even recognize the existence of a traditional God. Regardless of the outer form, however, nestled within every religion is tremendous symbolic, esoteric content that focuses on the inner life of the soul, the underlying "oneness" of experience and the interconnectedness of all things. Aldous Huxley called this "the perennial philosophy," others call it "The One Life Principle." As history shows, the dualism of exoteric religion—there's us and then there's God, we're Muslims and they're Jews, my Jesus is better than your Jesus—leads to one-upmanship, war and a state of perpetual suffering. But unity consciousness gives birth to creators and preservers by promoting and manifesting compassion, understanding, love and respect. If we are all parts of one whole, then there is absolutely nothing that is not sacred or integral to Life—no one who is unworthy, wrong or dispensable.

At this stage of human history it is imperative that we rally behind what unites us as souls, rather than reinforce what separates us. The foundation of the One Life Principle is the indivisibility of the creator and creation, the reflective relationship between cause and effect, the inherent potential for all of God's children to embrace Life's true nature as unconditional love and realize their own divinity. If there is only One, then God is all-present and *all* souls are part of the miracle of creation regardless of their belief system, cultural background, gender, age, race or socio-economic position. If there is only One, then God is all-knowing and *all* souls have equal and unlimited access to knowledge and wisdom. If there is only One, then God is all-powerful and *all* souls have the inherent power to tap into the spiritual kingdom within and create paradise without.

We don't need to renounce our individual religions in order to realize the commonality of spiritual experience. When we open ourselves up to the truth that is shared by all religions, we align ourselves with the One Life behind all of creation. We join the sages and saints and become living souls by:

- Adhering to the words of the Buddha: "Everyone trembles at the whip; everyone likes life. Considering others as yourself, do not kill or promote killing." (*Dhammapada*, 130)² And by looking to Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and all the courageous men and women of Israel who are working for peace, including Rabbi Arik Ascherman of *Rabbis for Human Rights* and Ruth Hiller of *New Profile*, for inspiration.
- Practicing *tzedakah*, the Hebrew word for charity, and taking *Proverbs 11: 24-25*³ as our creed, "Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water."
- Honoring and emulating the goodness of our Creator and by taking Mohammad's words to heart: "Requite evil with good, and the one who is your enemy will be your dearest friend." (*Qur'an 41: 34*)⁴
- Realizing the power of purpose in our everyday lives and remembering Jesus' words, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." (*Matthew 7:7*)⁵
- Accepting that because we are all part of the One Life, in reality there is no death. We meditate on Krishna's words to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita (15:6-7)*,

² Thomas Cleary, Translator, *Dhammapada: The Sayings of Buddha* (Bantam Books, 1994), 47.

³ *The New Revised Standard Version* (The Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989).

⁴ Bonnie Louise Kuchler, Editor, *One Heart: Wisdom from the World's Scriptures* (One Spirit, 2003), 41.

⁵ *The New Revised Standard Version*.

“My abode is not lighted by sun or by moon,
And once going there, one from time is immune,
All beings are My eternal fragmental parts;
They exist always in Me, and I in their hearts.”⁶

Shiva, the God of destruction, serves a positive function when balanced by Brahma, the Creator and Vishnu, the Preserver. We harness the powers of Brahma and Vishnu when we act as living souls who respect and encourage the pursuit of all beings to know themselves as God’s creatures. But the path doesn’t end there. After realizing and actualizing our true nature as spiritual beings, we are lovingly given access to the full force of Shiva, not to kill, but to destroy the walls that separate one soul from another or any soul from its Creator. In so doing, we take part in *Tikkun Olam*, which means repairing the world in Hebrew. And since the world is our collective creation, we continually repair ourselves. By aligning ourselves with our highest aspirations, not with the lowest common denominator, with our greatest potential, not with our failures, with love, and not with hate, we help to create heaven on earth, our birthright as living souls. Let us pursue Life, not death.

⁶ Swami Bhaktipada, Translator, *Heart of the Gita: Always Think of Me* (Palace Publishing, 1990), 193.