

All Souls: What is a Soul?
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Channing Memorial Church
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As we are celebrating All Souls Day, it is important to consider “What is a soul?” This is a question that has been asked through out time. There are as many answers as there are religions, philosophies and branches of science. Most simply, a soul is that unseen essence that animates the body. Some are more comfortable calling this essence mind or consciousness or personality.

Before I explore this question further, I would like to tell you a story. It happened about this time of year when the air had grown chilly and flocks of geese began heading south for the winter. There was a man named James Kidd who was a miner and prospector. He was also an eccentric, which means he lived differently from the other folks in his town and did not seem to care what anyone thought of him. James Kidd wore shabby clothes and a battered gray fedora hat. He owned little. He lived by himself in a small shack with no children, relatives, friends or partner. Besides working, the one thing he did regularly was gaze up at the sky. He did this in the early light of dawn and sometimes at night he would scramble onto the roof to study the stars.

Early one November morning in 1949, James Kidd disappeared in the Arizona desert; a thorough investigation, revealed no clues or evidence of foul play, so eventually Kidd was declared legally dead. My story might have ended there except as many of you know when someone dies, there’s often a lot of paperwork and unfinished business that needs to be attended to. Since he had no family, this task fell to an estate-tax commissioner. Well, the commissioner was surprised to discover that this humble man had accumulated a small fortune of half a million dollars. She was even more astounded when she found a hand-written letter on a piece of lined paper that read:

This is my first and only will and is dated the second day in January 1946. I have no heirs, I have not been married in my life, after all my funeral expenses have been paid and \$100 to some preacher of the gospel to say farewell at my grave sell all my property, what is all in cash and stocks [with E F Hutton Co Phoenix some in safety box], and have this money to go in a research or some scientific proof of a soul of the human body which leaves at death. I think in time there can be a Photograph of soul leaving the human at death.

Signed,
James Kidd

As you can imagine, this document caused quite a stir! If you were given a small fortune to help prove the existence of the human soul, what would you do? Who would you entrust to do this research? Should the funds be given to MIT or the Psychic Network?

Well, what happened next was known as “The Great Soul Trial” which occurred in the Superior Court of Phoenix, Arizona in 1967. The will was considered legitimate, what needed to be decided was the beneficiary. Who would receive James Kidd’s sizeable estate? Many people came forward—no less than 17 organizations and 78 individuals! These folks were eager to claim the money and each one argued forcefully that they had the means to offer proof of the human soul.

Time does not allow me to tell you about all the soul-searchers but I want to highlight three of them. One woman claimed that she could actually see souls of the departed and claimed that James Kidd himself was pacing in the courtroom. A preacher claimed the ability to communicate directly with souls and members of his congregation testified that he proved his powers of mental telepathy through blindfolded demonstrations. A geophysicist explained that the soul is the center of cosmic vibrations and that once the body dies the person is no longer able to accept or record these vibrations.

Science, religion, and parapsychology all offer different avenues to this mystery. The Great Soul Trail dragged on for years. The Judge ruled that the funds be given to a Neurological Institute but this decision was contested by several parapsychology groups, the ruling was overturned, and the funds were ultimately awarded to a Psychical Research Foundation.

Unfortunately, James Kidd’s wish was not fulfilled. There is no photograph of a human soul leaving the body at death. The question of the existence of a soul and whether souls survive after death remains to be proved. Just like James Kidd looking up at the night sky, this is a great mystery that fills our lives with wonder and reverence.

Personally, I believe the soul exists beyond the final heart beat. I believe this because it is a part of my daily experience. My life is touched by the essence of other people who lived before me. This is true not only in the blood that runs through my veins but in the physical spaces which I inhabit, the authors whose words and thoughts speak to me across the ages, and in my relationships with other people.

Although most of you have never met my brother, Michael, whose photo I brought with me this morning, his soul breathes through my life. I do not see him pacing in the back of the church or hear his voice, but my love for him and his love for me extends beyond the bounds of time and space. I know that this is true for you and your loved ones who you honor here today. Their souls continue to breathe through your lives. I may never have met most of the people and some pets who we honor here today but their character lives on through you and in their lasting contributions in this world.

Personally, I believe that the soul will remain an unseen essence because it is an animating force beyond our comprehension. Like the sacred hoop that Black Elk describes, our lives are contained in a larger unity with all that is and was and ever will be. Our task as human beings is to allow our living to open our hearts making us ever more aware of our connections and less afraid. We cannot guard ourselves from the

reality of death. However, we can make the most of our lives, dancing and singing, laughing and playing, sharing our feelings of sorrow and fear with one another so that we can make the most of this day. Why would we have a parade of skeletons in church? Not to be ghoulish or scary but to remind us of a universal truth, that life is precious and to be celebrated. Blessed Be.