

“The Soul Is We”

Luther E. Smith Jr.

Engage the soul, and you engage history—the history of a person and the history of a people. This statement should help us to perceive the soul as both a personal and communal reality. The care of the soul that pastoral counselors, spiritual directors, seminary professors, and contextual supervisors offer entails attention to the soul’s ancestral and contemporary formation.

The meanings of the word “soul” are multiple. Dictionary definitions interpret it as the spiritual dimension of an individual, the essence of a person or tradition, the emotional character of people and art forms, and the sense of authentic identity. These definitions are not necessarily competing with one another. Encountering the soul is to encounter a reality that is personal and inextricably woven by the spiritual character, historical experiences, ancestral identities, and self-understandings of past and present cultures.

This more encompassing understanding of “soul” is especially evident when the term is applied to a tradition. In Huston Smith’s *The Soul of Christianity*, his characterization of the soul of Christianity refers to the life

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of Jesus, various church traditions, cultural developments, and major historical events.¹ Whatever is the contemporary understanding of Christianity's soul, that understanding is indebted to influences that preceded the birth of Jesus (e.g., Judaism). Even non-religious influences (i.e., political rivalries and colonialism) shaped the cultures that shaped Christianity.

In W. E. B. Du Bois's classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, he writes about how understanding the souls of Black people in the United States involves perceiving them within the framework of their history. The horrors of slavery, glimmers of opportunity, and assurance from singing the spirituals informed Black people's souls. Discussing the arrival of emancipation, Du Bois writes:

In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. . . . For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem.²

Du Bois is saying, if you want to know me (my soul) you must know what it has meant for *my ancestors and me* to live in this oppressive country. Despite their very different subjects, both Smith and Du Bois discuss the concept of soul as an entity formed by ancestral histories.

Perceiving the soul as the bearer of ancestral history makes demands upon religious professionals in roles of soul care. Religious professionals are accustomed to helping mentees examine how their personal and family backgrounds influence practices of ministry. What must not be ignored, however, is the longer and wider view of background—longer in terms of time, wider in terms of influences. In addition to inquiring about the significance of immediate family relationships and those of the past generations, care of the soul involves attending to the social (race, ethnicity, class) identities and ancestors (known and unknown) of those in supervision.

My vocation in forming persons in ministry has been as a seminary professor (who is also involved leadership in the school's contextual education program) and in mentoring relationships with ministers (lay and ordained clergy). Although this article most often refers to the roles of faculty, placement supervisors, and spiritual directors, the insights also apply to pastoral counselors and the congregational practices of clergy who care for souls.

HISTORIES, BODIES, AND SOULS

Clarence's³ case study stunned our contextual education group. We were not surprised by the racism in his setting, but we had not been presented with such a vile expression of it related to pastoral care for patients in this hospital. As a student chaplain, he had visited with an elderly White woman several times, and they had had congenial conversations. She delighted in his coming to her room. On his last visit she complained about the Black people in the hospital. After referring to them by one of the most offensive terms, she continued to describe them as "no good," "good for nothing," and as only "taking up space" in the hospital. The woman was blind. Clarence is African American.

As this tirade against Black people continued, her daughter entered the room and quickly announced to her mother that the chaplain was Black. Shocked by this, the mother paused and then shouted to Clarence, "Don't leave me, please don't leave me. Take my address and come see me."

Our group of students, the on-site chaplain, and I (as the faculty supervisor) discussed with Clarence his response to the woman and her daughter, the pastoral care issues, and his feelings. Clarence was committed to understanding what might be the best caregiving responses in this situation. In addition, he felt deeply troubled by the assault on his identity even as he also felt compelled to retain a caring demeanor for the woman and her daughter. The incident had so shaken him at his core (his soul) that the two of us had ongoing conversations about the matter in my office.

The questions poured forth: Why did this woman have such animosity toward Black people? Was the woman's last plea an expression of embarrassment or of her fear of being alone? Did the daughter feel the same way about Black people but had the advantage of seeing Clarence's race? What was Clarence to do with the rage building within as he felt dehumanized by the woman? These questions and more were efforts to heal Clarence's wounded soul.

The reflections with Clarence went beyond professional issues of care for this woman and her daughter. And in light of the pleasant relationship that Clarence and the woman had had before this incident, interpersonal rapport was not a problem. The historical drama of racial conflict was portrayed in that hospital room. Clarence's inner turmoil came from his desire to respond as a professional chaplain and from his feelings that as an African American who was aware of the struggles to overcome discrimination,

he owed it to his ancestors to give a stinging rebuke to the woman. Would the failure to engage her racial insults betray his soul?

In the effort to understand her racial animosity, we speculated about the ancestral connections of her soul. Did she grow up in a racially prejudiced family and perhaps in communities with long histories of hatred and discrimination? Were her beliefs informed by stories of interracial conflict? Might she feel some duty to uphold the convictions and status of her ancestors? None of these questions were asked to excuse this woman's behavior. Our speculations were an effort to understand her prejudice as the consequence of events and relationships unrelated to his interaction with her in the hospital. Her soul was the bearer of realities that preceded her birth.

Clarence's case study was about a past critical incident. Martha asked to see me about a forthcoming pastoral responsibility that was causing her great anxiety. Her bishop was appointing her to become the pastor of an African American congregation. She was excited to be entrusted with a cross-racial appointment and its opportunities to demonstrate that her denomination was endeavoring to overcome segregating practices. Still, she worried whether the church members would welcome her as their pastor. Nothing in her experience as a White woman had focused on pastoral leadership in a Black Church.

Martha was astute in recognizing her lack of preparation for the upcoming pastoral role. In addition to not having much personal experience in the African American community, she had not taken academic courses about the Black Church. Despite this lack of preparation, Martha believed that God and her willingness to be humble in her on-the-job training would sustain her.

I was impressed with her awareness that the racial history of the church's South Carolina community would be a factor in her immediate and developing relationship with her congregation. She knew that in her pastoral roles related to soul care she would need to pay attention to the ways that history and the distinctive racial dimensions of her church were outside her experience and understanding. Martha was committed to pursuing books and conversations that would provide insights about race relations and the Black church. And she was wise to expect that listening to the stories of her members, without being defensive or presumptive, would likely lead members to extend invitations for her to journey in the remembrances and devotions of their souls.

I counseled Martha on two major matters for this appointment. First, I suggested that she would need to offer herself to the congregation in ways that demonstrated her sensitivity to the ancestral stories of her soul. Whatever might be the racial chasm between her and the congregation, it would widen if the congregation sensed that she was uncomfortable with her own racial identity. John O'Donohue argues against "the old notion of the soul being hidden somewhere deep within the body." He contends, "the body is in the soul."⁴ Her members' souls embraced their Black bodies with all the memories, anxieties, abuses, and nurture that Black bodies have. A relationship with her members' souls meant relating to the realities of their Black bodies. Likewise, if Martha desired to have the congregation connect with her soulfully, they would need to sense that she was offering her White body realities as a sign of trust and love. This did not mean that the journey together would then be smooth. However, it would be characterized by an authenticity that facilitated soul-to-soul intimacy.

The second matter I mentioned was recognizing that she would likely have challenges with her congregation that were not related to race. Disagreements about leadership roles, budget priorities, church music, and relationships with the larger community are just some of the issues that fuel congregational discord. Also, there are a host of reasons for some members to dislike a new minister's leadership even when the minister and the congregation are of the same race. Martha would need to assert her pastoral authority and leadership without assuming that all challenges resulted from her being White. Interpreting all complaint and conflict as race related would diminish the complexity of the church and its members to a single factor. Such a diminishment would violate the richly textured souls of the church members. It would also mislead Martha's efforts to offer creative leadership that was relevant to the congregational challenges.

Racial and ethnic realities inform every context of ministry. Geographical location, the laws and practices that have shaped residential patterns, the extent of diversity in a context, a context's history of addressing racial and ethnic disparities, and the people who serve in positions of authority are just a few of the factors in interpreting how a context is shaped by racial and ethnic realities. These realities merit the attention and analysis of student interns, ministers (lay and ordained), and those who provide them supervision or spiritual direction. However, every issue of ministry is not based on racial factors. Helping someone being formed in ministry to dis-

cern whether a church issue is primarily one of social differences, congregational tradition, members' personalities, or members' conflicts with one another is a vital contribution that supervisors and spiritual directors may make.

Still, we must also be aware of many people's desire to avoid engaging race matters as a factor in relationships and conflict. In so doing, they not only fail to perceive the impact of race in shaping their reality, they also fail to acknowledge the depth of the soul as bearer of ancestral history. I and many other African Americans have had White persons say to us, "When I see you, I don't see color" or "When I see you, I don't see you as a Black person." Their intent is to declare that racial factors do not inhibit their ability to have a genuine soul-to-soul relationship with someone who is Black. They are basically saying, "I've risen above looking at people through the lens of race, and I'm able to have an experience with you based on something deeper than our racial differences." When I hear such a statement, I feel that the speaker is dismissing the fact that my body is a bearer of racial history. Why must acknowledging my racial identity be perceived as a barrier to our interacting deeply and authentically? More to the point, I believe the person is signaling that she or he does not want to relate to the fullness of my soul.

Soul care involves appreciating how bodies are indicators of our souls' connections to history and to the current realities of our community. Greater clarity about how the body and soul relate to history and community comes only through many conversations. What makes eventual clarity possible is our paying attention to how history, body, and soul merge.

"MY NAME IS"

Naisa Wong introduced herself to the class by describing her vocational path that led to completing seminary and becoming a spiritual director. She then explained the origin of her name. For her maturation and lifelong efforts to live a fulfilling life, her father wanted her to have a unique name that would remind her to always remember and honor her ancestral heritage—a name that would inspire her to claim that she is both Chinese and American. He imprinted this desire upon her heart through her name Naisa. Naisa is "Asian" spelled backwards. For many of her early years, Naisa thought having a name that was "backwards" implied something negative

about her. However, after looking up the definition of backwards, she had a new perspective that signified the deep meaning her father intended; backwards can mean "in reverse of the usual order" and "toward and into the past." This understanding of her name has emboldened Naisa as she moves into the future.⁵

Naisa's name is unique, but the experience of parents connecting their children to ancestors through naming is not. I have known many persons whose parents gave them Swahili names. Translated, the chosen name often bespoke a virtue or character trait. For example, Aiysha meant powerful, and Kenyatta meant jewel. Additionally, the name was a rejection of European American culture's influence over the child and was an embrace of Mother Africa for identity. The African name served as a reminder of ancestral roots that preceded the race's experience of enslavement and oppression.

Such choices of names served three purposes. First, the naming countered the values and influence of the immediate culture that failed to affirm the child's racial histories. Second, it identified the ancestral community that would be a resource of examples, values, and meaning for the child's soul. And third, the naming emphasized the ancestors to whom the child's soul was indebted and therefore accountable.

Most of the persons I knew expressed pride in the intents of their parents and the meanings of their names. A few felt that their name reflected more about the identity issues of their parents than the shaping of their own identity. Even when a name was not connected to a racial or ethnic heritage, it was often linked to a cherished relationship or admired person that might inspire a child to enact in her life the personal qualities of the individual after whom she was named.

Paying attention to the stories of being named is a means for supervisors and spiritual directors to receive insights on the extent to which someone being formed in ministry is relying upon or ignoring the ancestral dimensions of his soul. In my seminary's contextual education reflection groups, I was fascinated by students' different ways of relating to their ancestral past. Every student had a personal narrative about faith, ministry, and social outlook that related to their nuclear family and grandparents. More Black students than White ones would speak about the tribulations of family members through a history of oppression. These Black students may not have known all their family members' names and stories; still, they were aware that theirs was a heritage of enslavement, discrimination, terror, and

injustice. Their commitment to ministry was usually described as attending to this ancestral history through theological convictions and activism that focused on liberation, justice, and racial reconciliation.

The Korean students in my classes expressed feelings of being disoriented—feelings that resulted from having few supportive relationships as they were now living in a foreign culture and an unfamiliar academic setting. They cherished their homeland's traditions and the formative energies of their Korean churches. And yet they were also encountering social theories and contextual practices that challenged norms of Korean traditions and customs.

New contexts evoke questions that engage the soul anew. Why are behaviors so different here than in my homeland? Why are so many standards of morality different? Why do people treat me as being less consequential just because I'm not fluent in this country's language? Do my cultural references carry any authority in this country's classrooms and churches? How do I discern the difference between universal and contextual values? Who can I trust as an interpreter of this unfamiliar culture? I feel so inadequate in many situations; am I as smart as I thought myself to be? The new contexts and the new perspectives they were being taught about ministry in church and society led my Korean students to wonder if the ancestral histories and wisdom of their souls were relevant resources beyond their homeland.

I spent time with my students discussing the distinctions between particular (contextual) and universal truths. As we examined ways that a contextual assertion of truth could entail a universal assertion and how a universal assertion could entail a contextual one, students began to relax their anxiety about abandoning cultural wisdom. The Korean students discovered that many of their American classmates were also struggling with unfamiliar contextual education placements and disorienting ideas from seminary classes. Among both groups of students, understandings of authority and truth were going through the painful process of transformation. Consequently, their souls were troubled. However, over time, this troubling was interpreted as growth—which is a discipline of faith.

Contextual supervisors and faculty do well to remember that students might experience our efforts to help their growth as severance from their ancestral past. We need to be aware that when students articulate their struggles with theological and relationship issues of ministry and their setting, they may be expending even more energy trying to reconcile their learning

with the authority of their souls' ancestors. Whether this occurs consciously or not, immediately or not, or because of one's ancestral name or not, the soul's ancestors demand attention. If we are wise as we guide students in reflective practice, our questions and comments will be attentive to the presence and significance of their ancestors.

MY STORY, OUR STORY

My White faculty colleague was dissatisfied with a Black student's participation in a contextual education reflection group. He felt that the student was angry about racial issues in the setting but was unwilling to offer a full emotional response. As another colleague and I listened to his complaint, we wondered if he really knew what he might be asking of the student. We knew our colleague was used to encouraging frustration, anger, and even tears. But was he prepared to receive rage?

The rage of many Black students is not just about their personal experiences. Their gut-wrenching feelings about the systemic racial injustices that persist in their placements are intensified by the fact that the placement has had generations of Black people who have suffered indignities. Was this faculty supervisor prepared to receive rage about what was done to this student's ancestral community? Was the faculty member capable of responding to the rage with confession about his White ancestral community's role in systemic injustice? Demanding to receive the emotions of the soul can lead to a more explosive and fierce response than anticipated—even more than one has the skills to receive. Care must be taken in making such a demand.

Black students who have extensive experience in academic and professional settings with White people are often bewildered, angry, and exhausted after repeatedly addressing racial issues without signs of progress in these settings. Some choose silence rather than once again having to elevate emotions and experience disappointment unto despair. The skepticism that racial realities will be taken seriously is deep.

I often heard seminary students bemoan their inability to introduce racial realities in classroom discussions. In raising questions about the treatment of Black people in their courses on church history and theology, for example, they were met with silence or a response that indicated their questions were diversions from the day's topic. Some faculty stated that they ap-

preciated the questions but that they did not have a scholarly understanding of the issues raised by the student.

Black students were nonplussed that White faculty and fellow students dealt with questions about race as if these were about a history and places in which White people were absent. The Black students came to class hoping to gain insight on *our story* (one that included all Christians); they could not see themselves, however, in the lectures and course readings. The failure to engage the Black students' questions felt to them as a failure to care about the historic and communal nature of their souls.

An obvious explanation for the omission of Black lives in an academic course is the racial bias in academies' education of scholars. The insensitivities and prejudices in society also exist in higher education at all its levels of research, teaching, and scholarship. This outcome is not dependent upon perceiving Black people as unimportant. It occurs from assuming that being White is normative.

In some of my classes and spirituality workshops, I have taken ten minutes to ask persons to write about the meaning they give to their racial identity. Invariably, the Black persons would have a list of statements that usually related to struggle in a society with a long history of racial oppression. Their statements were not just about the forces of oppression; they also described forces of faith, music, family, community, and aspiration that were integral to their sense of identity. Most of the White persons in the room would have a confused look and nothing on their paper. More recently, a few would list "privilege" as attributable to being White. The contrast was always stark. It was as if the White persons had no reason to contemplate what it meant to be White.

Another exercise I use with groups is to ask persons to write "I am _____" ten times on their individual sheets of paper and then fill in the blanks. Almost every Black participant has written "I am Black" or "I am African American" as one of the ten responses. Rarely have I had a White person write "I am White." In a nation where racism is a major factor in its history and in characterizing its soul, how do we explain the contrast? The explanation given previously, that being White is "normative," seems to apply in understanding the responses of White participants.

In our reflections about their list of answers, the White participants admitted that they did not focus on their racial identity in transactions of education, being hired, shopping, buying a house, and being stopped by

the police. They did not perceive people in authority as being predisposed to discriminate against them because of their race. Being White did not result in adverse consequences that required them to be on constant alert for racial prejudice.

Understanding why persons have different levels of consciousness about racial identity is important in forming persons for ministry. Students/directees need to be aware of the significance of race in their own stories and in their contexts of ministry. How conscious are they of their own souls' racial histories? Are they proud, embarrassed, or indifferent to the history of their ancestors' interactions with people of different races? How might they relate to their ancestral history to affect a more creative ministry for themselves and for the care of souls in their contexts? How will they respond to inquiries about their racial identity? What do they suspect to be the impact of their responses in their contexts of ministry? How might their consciousness about race and their willingness to discuss racial issues be vital to ministry in both racially homogeneous and racially diverse settings? These questions guide students to reflect deeply on the significance of racial identity to their souls and the souls of persons with whom they are in ministry.

The history of my ancestral community occurred within national and world history. My personal story occurs within a larger social context that is *our story*. When persons ignore or fail to see the importance of race matters in "our story," I feel they are not taking seriously the realities of my soul. Such a lack of respect is a condition for distrust. And as we know, acts of ministry and any hope for nurturing individuals and communities for creative living depend on trust.

Engendering trust in supervisory relationships with students and directees entails communicating one's own place in "our story" that provides the broader context for a student's focus on "my story." As the supervisor, do my personal experiences provide me with insights on a student's/directee's cultural challenges that affect her or his ministry? In relation to a student's/directee's ancestral history, are my racial ancestors oppressors or victims or unassociated? Am I able to discuss these matters without inflating how knowledgeable I am or being defensive about my racial identity and heritage?

There are times when supervisors have difficulty exploring the complex and perplexing realities of "our story" because they are uncomfortable with cultural matters about which they do not have expertise. The lack of

expertise is felt to be a lack of authority. The lack of authority is experienced as a lack of power. And the lack of power is disconcerting and threatening. This is where a supervisor may try to avoid focusing the cultural issues or may decide that someone more qualified needs to be in the supervisory role.

During the years that I served as a contextual education director in my seminary, I had faculty colleagues who had difficulty with their role of guiding students in the contextual education reflection groups. Some colleagues felt that they did not have expertise about the contexts and ministry issues and that therefore what they said in the group was without authority. They encouraged students to embrace unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations of ministry while they remained dubious as to whether their supervisory responsibility was a good use of faculty time since they felt unprepared to address contextual challenges. The faculty members' discomfort in situations where they lacked the security of being an authority for reflection issues was a persistent bone of contention for the program.

Avoiding issues that threaten one's identity because of the loss of authority, or being associated with an oppressive racial group, or being unfamiliar with the cultural issues of students is a tactless retreat from the supervisory role. Care for souls involves being on the journey with students/directees as a companion who risks experiences of confusion, estrangement, and vulnerability. The mutuality of risk and susceptibility to threatening outcomes are basic tenets of trustworthy relationships. The adage "we both have skin in the game" is understood in this setting as "we both have *soul* in the game." Reflection on practices of ministry then occurs at a level of depth that holds the promise for understanding and transformation like no other. Experiencing an exposed soul can motivate us to take off our shoes, for where we now stand is holy ground. Such an experience transforms us to enact our vocation with increased awareness of the holiness in those with whom we journey and the holiness in our practices of ministry.

Care for souls entails care for people's sacred bodies and attention to the ancestral histories they bear. People of faith live more fully in the present when they remember and respond creatively to the past to which they are indebted. However, our souls do more than engage the past and present. They yearn to fulfill their sacred calling to be a faithful ancestral presence in the souls of coming generations. May our practices of supervision and direction enable our souls to honor that call.

NOTES

- 1 Huston Smith, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).
- 2 W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1929), 8.
- 3 In this article, the names of students have been changed to honor confidentiality. The name "Naisa" is the actual name of a student I discuss later and is used with her permission.
- 4 John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper/Perennial, 2004), 154.
- 5 Additional background on Naisa's naming came from personal conversations with her and from a paper she wrote ("The Red River of Lost Memory") for her Certificate in Trauma & Spiritual Care class.