

Young Souls, Old Souls: Part One

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Various spiritual traditions assert that human beings possess individuated souls. Some traditions from a more vitalistic perspective suggest that every living entity has a soul. Still other metaphysical systems posit the existence of a singular but collective Oversoul, of which individual ensoulment is a temporary expression. All of these narratives harken back to a basic spiritual presumption, that consciousness underlies all manifestation in the material realm. Modern science tends to have the opposite perspective, namely, that consciousness (and Life itself) is a *product* of physicality and does not exist or persevere without a material basis.

The spiritual traditions that assert otherwise (i.e., that consciousness pre-exists and is not produced by physicality) often put forth the idea of one soul amassing experience over a diversity of many different lives through reincarnation or rebirth. Some metaphysical systems hold that not all the incarnations in a soul's journey will necessarily occur within a single context (i.e., as a human being) and may include life-forms beyond those that exist on earth. The specifics of reincarnation vary from Buddhism to Hinduism to Taoism — and different sects within the same tradition may disagree about the whys and hows — but the general notion of rebirths into the material realm as part of the soul's journey runs through many religious and spiritual disciplines.

Personally, I have no firm beliefs about any of this. The origins of everything — the Universe, the Earth, Life, and Consciousness Itself — remain mysterious to me. Over my lifetime I've studied and entertained various metaphysical hypotheses about the nature of reality (and unreality), but none became fixed for me as a firm belief. What I do embrace, however, is a less ultimate and more pragmatic assumption, namely, that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our world are significant in shaping our experience and creating meaning. Whether those stories are an accurate description of the way the universe is put together is less important to me than the richness of their narratives to provide us with a poetic sense of who we are, who we could be, and the vulnerabilities or struggles to which we are heir.

I want to state right up front that the reason I'm writing this story-based commentary is to offer a rationale — either metaphorical or literal, depending on one's beliefs — for why we are where we find ourselves now in civilization at this point in the 21st century. It'll take me a number of pages to get there, however, so please bear with me while I set up the story.

One thought worth interjecting here is a peculiar notion about souls (alluded to in the opening paragraph) that has always bothered me. That's the assumption that human beings have souls, but other life forms — including animals and plants — do not. Christianity is largely responsible for that presumption, which I find perversely arrogant. As far as I'm concerned, from within the soul-dynamic, everything that can be called an organic entity (meaning that it that lives and breathes) has a soul that allows consciousness to register life-experience in the physical. And, just as obviously, not all consciousness is the same. A bacteria or jellyfish has a different and more limited consciousness than an elephant, a giant Sequoia tree, or a human being. Natural gradations of consciousness exist according to the biological structure, resources, and limits of a given species. Anyway, in the story I'm telling here, everything that lives has a soul. If you disagree, please write your own story.

Having established that, I also need to posit that a bell curve exists concerning the souls and the consciousness that underlie or inhabit physical bodies. If bacteria have souls and consciousness (however that may be shaped), I'll bet that some bacteria are more conscious than others. Same with human beings. We are much more individual and varied than may be apparent — so much so, in fact, that could we exchange our individual consciousness for even a moment with our best friend or closest beloved, we would probably feel nauseous from the shock of disorientation. All souls may come from the same source, but life on earth is custom-tailored to emphasize a diversity of experience, perception, and consciousness that is breathtaking in scope.

Among the many ways possible to discuss the wide range of consciousness among human beings, one of the easiest and most convenient translations is that of young versus old souls. Not that such a yardstick is all-encompassing. It's not, certainly, and undoubtedly leans toward the facile or simplistic side. But keeping it simple is generally wise counsel in both life and story-telling, and I think that rule applies here.

What is a "young" soul? For purposes of the story I'm telling in this commentary, a young soul is a newly-individuated consciousness that seeks and is receptive to embodied experience in the material realm. The young soul is either just starting out or still in an early stage of its journey toward fully realized individuality. Young souls are eager for life-experience; they tend to have voracious appetites and strong desires, and they're more likely to leap into experience without reflecting on the possible ramifications (for themselves or others). Young souls also love games of competition (King of the Hill is arguably high on the list),

since their egos are given free rein to run like the wind and try to become the best, brightest, most famous, happiest, richest, whatever. The easiest analogy to describe young souls in human embodiment is to equate them with adolescents — teenagers who are hormone-driven and propel themselves into conflict-laden experience with abandon and gusto.

Not all young souls are vibrant, however. Some are stuck in a kind of remedial training where each life has a narrower focus than the one before. They can't move on until they understand whatever particular lesson their souls are encountering, so they feel caged, as if condemned to detention in school. I don't claim to know the percentage of young souls in bodies alive on the earth today that are in that unpleasant situation, but the increasingly dire circumstances of modern civilization are probably drawing in more young souls with arrested development who need pointed and difficult circumstances — basically a stronger whack up side the head — to get their attention and promote realization of the necessary "Ah-Ha!" for them to move on.

By contrast, "old" souls are more calculating in their approach to embodied experience. They like and seek certain experiences, but they've had enough of other experiences. This doesn't mean, of course, that if an old soul has logged enough illness or suffering, that it can choose a human life without those. No, illness and suffering are inevitable, inescapable parts of every human life. They come with the territory. But the old soul who has experienced much suffering and integrated its meanings is likely to be better equipped to handle illness with grace than a young soul encountering pain for the first time (or the thousandth, since the soul's journey from young and immature to old and wise transpires over an immense amount of time and experience — one or two lifetimes is but a drop in the bucket). I wouldn't say that old souls correspond to human seniors in old age. Certainly they could resemble grandparents in tone, but they are just as likely to be similar to mid-life adults in their prime. The one thing an old soul cannot be, however, is childish or adolescent.

If I have inadvertently implied that this whole business of souls evolving is some kind of contest or competition about who's further along in understanding, I apologize. It's difficult when writing about souls to avoid leaving that impression. If soul-realization is simply a game of who's making the grade and who's not, then something is really wrong with the universe. No, souls are where they are, they're learning what they're learning, and the point of the journey for us all is finally to find our way home.

The great thing about young souls is their enthusiasm, passion, and eagerness to create (although they often bite off more than they chew). Their sheer vitality and zest for embodied life — the wonders of the material world, the physical body, the mind, the emotions, and all their sensory correspondences — is quite wondrous. Their vision and understanding may be limited, but they participate fully, and often with fresh eyes.

The great thing about old souls is their maturity and wisdom. Incarnated as human beings, they seem to know more than other people know, even when they apparently have never had a particular experience. Old souls may embody passion (as animals, most of us do), and they may express those vital emotions with intensity, either frequently or from time to time, but they are mostly not ruled by their passions. They feel the biological drives of their embodied biology, certainly, but as their human selves age, old souls tend to be interested less in the drives themselves and more in directing those powerful motivations successfully (which means achieving what they intend as cleanly as possible, without inadvertently creating what they don't want).

At the level of thought and rationality, young souls can be both extraordinarily smart and incredibly stupid, often at the same time. Old souls can too, but they are less likely to rush headlong into such double-binds. Old souls are also less certain of the "correctness" of beliefs, both their own and others'. They're better able to exist with ambivalence, if not always comfortably, at least with grace and forbearance.

Both young and old souls suffer errors of judgment. Both fall on their faces a lot. Having slipped on the banana peel and taken a pratfall, however, the old soul lies on the ground and examines what happened. The young soul curses, gets right up, and surges ahead without any reflection. In other words, the old soul is interested in learning what experience is, how it works, and what causes certain outcomes. The young soul is interested mainly in directly undergoing any experience; learning from it may or may not occur.

Both young and old souls can be found everywhere in human life. No particular arena in the realm of embodied human experience is exclusively the province of either young or old souls. Not in my universe, anyway. Every area of human endeavor includes a diversity of both soul categories. Becoming a soldier in the military doesn't imply that one is necessarily a young soul, and becoming a monk in a monastery doesn't mean that one is an old soul. Soldiers, monks, teachers, bankers, chemists, software programmers, and every other possible life-journey can and do include both young and old souls.

Also, no easy or superficial way exists to identify who is an old or young soul. The admonition to not judge a book by its cover applies here. Instead, we have to consider a book's contents, implications, and repercussions. Any divergent life-experience, some of which may appear extreme or questionable, might be of interest to either an old or young soul (although for different reasons), so just knowing what happens in a person's life won't give us a clue. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so the evaluation of a person's soul-maturity is relative, based on who's doing the judging.

End Part One; Part Two continues to conclusion