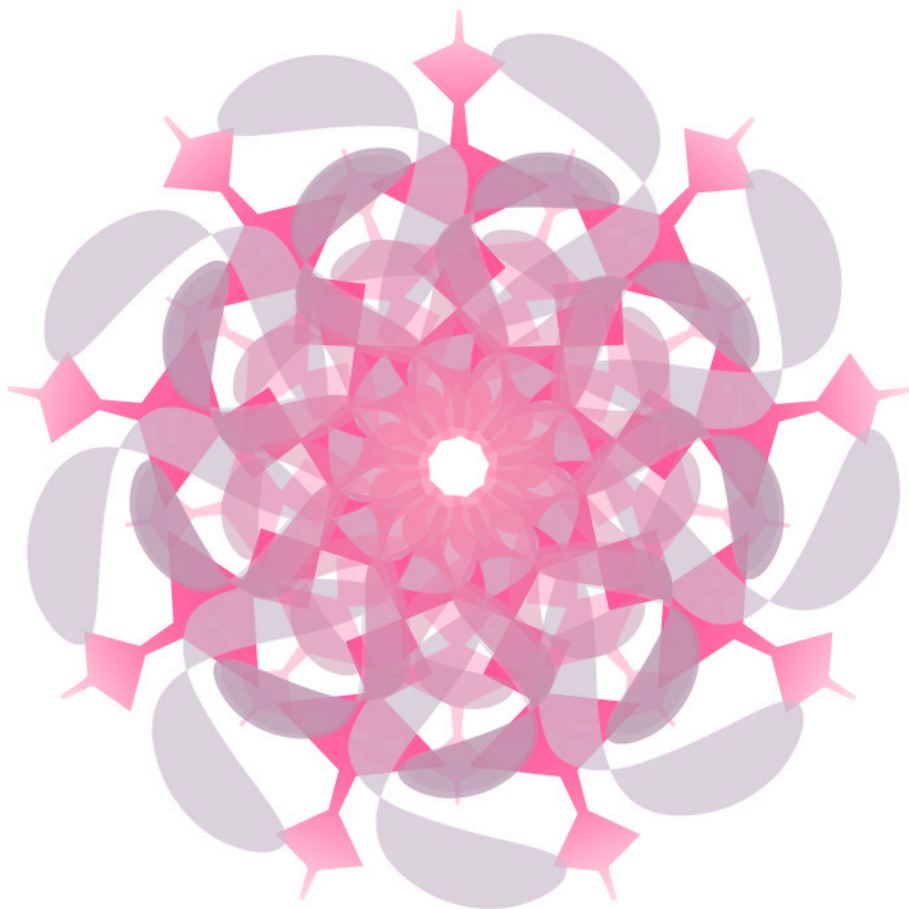


Soul Food

Prison of Self



September 2008

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Program

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**Angry men are blind and foolish, for reason at such a time takes flight
and, in her absence, wrath plunders all the riches of the intellect,
while the judgment remains the prisoner of its own pride.**

– *Pietro Aretin*

01. I have lain in this prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said—Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark, and has the nature of infinity.

But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden away in my nature, like a treasure hidden in a field, is humility.

It is the last thing left in me, and the best, the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself, so I know that it has come at the proper time. It could not have come before, nor later. Had anyone told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it.

As I found it, I wanted to keep it. I must do so. It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, a *Vita Nuova* for me. Of all things it is the strangest; one cannot give it away and another cannot give to one. One cannot acquire it except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it.

Now that I have realised that it is in me, I see quite clearly what I ought to do; in fact, must do. And when I use such a phrase as that, I need not say that I am not alluding to any external sanction or command. I admit none. I am far more of an individualist than I ever was. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself. My nature is seeking a fresh mode of self-realisation. That is all I am concerned with. And the first thing I have got to do is to free myself from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world.

– *Oscar Wilde, De Profundis*

02. We humans are often shackled with the incapacity to act, being captives in some dreadful, truly dreadful cage. I know there is such a thing as liberation, the longed-for liberation. If, whether with or without cause, you lose your good name and reputation, fall into want and adversity or under the pressure of circumstances, you are a prisoner. You cannot always tell what it is that bars your way, encompasses and entombs you, but you feel the barriers, the obstacles, the walls. You know what will cause the prison to collapse? A deep, genuine love, being friends and brothers, loving one another; that will break down the gates of the prison with irresistible force. Those who possess none of this, stay dead. But where friendship blooms, life is reborn.

– *Vincent Van Gogh*

03. A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

– *Albert Einstein*

04. And a man said, speak to us of self-knowledge.
And he answered, saying: Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights.
But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart's knowledge.
You would know in words that which you have always known in thought.
You would touch with your fingers the naked body of your dreams.
And it is well you should.
The hidden well-spring of your soul must needs rise and run murmuring to the sea:
And the treasure of your infinite depths would be revealed to your eyes.
But there be no scales to weigh your unknown treasure:
And seek not the depth of your knowledge with staff and sounding line.
For self is a sea boundless and measureless.
Say not, "I have found the truth", but rather "I have found a truth".
Say not, "I have the path of the soul". Say rather, "I have met the soul walking upon my path".
For the soul walks upon all paths.
The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed.
The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.

– *Kahlil Gibran*

Every day, in many ways, day after day, we walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-laws. But always meeting ourselves.

– *James Joyce*

05. In 1852 Bahá'u'lláh (The prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith) was taken to the notorious Siyah-Chal, the 'Black Pit' of Tihiran, a subterranean dungeon in which He was imprisoned for four months. Along the way He was stoned, ridiculed, and stripped of his outer garments.

“Upon our arrival We were first conducted along a pitch-black corridor, from whence We descended three steep flights of stairs to the place of confinement assigned to Us. The dungeon was wrapped in thick darkness, and Our fellow-prisoners numbered nearly a hundred and fifty souls... Though crowded, it had no other outlet than the passage by which We entered. No pen can depict that place, nor any tongue describe its loathsome smell. Most of these men had neither clothes nor bedding to lie on. God alone knoweth what befell Us in that most foul-smelling and gloomy place.”

“All those who were struck down by the storm that raged during that memorable year in Tihiran were Our fellow-prisoners in the Siyah-Chal, where we were confined.”

“We were all huddled together in one cell, our feet in stocks, and around our necks fastened the most galling of chains. The air we breathed was laden with the foulest impurities, while the floor on which we sat was covered with filth and infested with vermin. No ray of light was allowed to penetrate that pestilential dungeon or to warm its icy-coldness. We were placed in two rows, each facing the other. We had taught them to repeat certain verses which, every night, they chanted with extreme fervour. “God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-sufficing!” one row would intone, while the other would reply: “In Him let the trusting trust.” The chorus of these gladsome voices would continue to peal out until the early hours of the morning. Their reverberation would fill the dungeon, and, piercing its massive walls, would reach the ears of Nasiri'd-Din Shah, whose palace was not far distant from the place where we were imprisoned. “What means this sound?” he was reported to have exclaimed.”

– Bahá'u'lláh, from the account of His imprisonment

O SON OF MAN!

**If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest
My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me
and I may eternally live in thee.**

– Bahá'u'lláh

06. When a man expels, O Partha, all desires from the mind, and is satisfied in the self by the self, then is he called stable in intelligence. He whose mind is undisturbed in the midst of sorrows and amid pleasures is free from desire, from whom liking and fear and wrath have passed away, in the sage of settled understanding.

Who in all things is without affection though visited by the good or that evil and neither hates nor rejoices, his intelligence sits firmly founded in Wisdom.

– *Hindu scripture, from 'The Message of the Gita'*

07. Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

– *Hebrews 13:1-3, from the New Testament*

08. Silence can be a two-edged weapon. It will hurt me if I use it to hurt someone else. Silence can also be a blessing, if I enter into it serenely to take stock of myself and meditate on how I can improve.

God help me to know that silence, like speech, can reflect my inner feelings. Help me to use it, not as a cork to keep my anger bottled up, but to express a healing quiet of the spirit.

– *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*

09. If the Love You have for me,
Is like the love I have for You, My God, what detains me?
Oh, what is delaying You? Soul, what is it you desire of me?
My God, nothing other but to see You.
What is it that you fear more than self?
What I fear most is the loss of You.
A soul hidden in God, What does it desire?
Save to love more and more,
And, in love all hidden
Again and again to love You?
One all possessing love I ask My God, my soul centered in You,
Making a delightful nest,
A resting place most pleasing.

– *Saint Teresa of Avila*

10. Question: Is man a free agent in all his actions, or is he compelled and constrained?

Answer: This question is one of the most important and abstruse of divine problems... Some things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions; it is evident and clear that these actions are, for the most part, left to the will of man. But there are certain things to which man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, decline of power, injuries and misfortunes; these are not subject to the will of man, and he is not responsible for them, for he is compelled to endure them. But in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will.

For example, if he wishes, he can pass his time in praising God, or he can be occupied with other thoughts. He can be an enkindled light through the fire of the love of God, and a philanthropist loving the world, or he can be a hater of mankind, and engrossed with material things. He can be just or cruel. These actions and these deeds are subject to the control of the will of man himself; consequently, he is responsible for them.

Now another question arises. Man is absolutely helpless and dependent, since might and power belong especially to God. Both exaltation and humiliation depend upon the good pleasure and the will of the Most High...

Also the inaction or the movement of man depend upon the assistance of God. If he is not aided, he is not able to do either good or evil. But when the help of existence comes from the Generous Lord, he is able to do both good and evil; but if the help is cut off, he remains absolutely helpless. This is why in the Holy Books

they speak of the help and assistance of God. So this condition is like that of a ship which is moved by the power of the wind or steam; if this power ceases, the ship cannot move at all. Nevertheless, the rudder of the ship turns it to either side, and the power of the steam moves it in the desired direction. If it is directed to the east, it goes to the east; or if it is directed to the west, it goes to the west. This motion does not come from the ship; no, it comes from the wind or the steam...

That is to say, though the choice of good and evil belongs to man, under all circumstances he is dependent upon the sustaining help of life, which comes from the Omnipotent. The Kingdom of God is very great, and all are captives in the grasp of His Power. The servant cannot do anything by his own will; God is powerful, omnipotent, and the Helper of all beings.

– *Talk by `Abdu'l-Bahá*

11. Mencius said, ‘Though nothing happens that is not due to destiny, one accepts willingly what is one’s proper destiny. That is why he who understands destiny does not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse. He who dies after having done his best in following the Way dies according to his proper destiny.

It is never anyone’s proper destiny to die in fetters.’

– *Confucianism, Mencius*

12. O Lord, You have searched me and You know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
You perceive my thought from afar.
You discern my goings out and my lying down;
You are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue You know it completely, O my Lord.

– *Psalms 139: 1-4, from the Old Testament*

**I thank you, Lord for knowing me better than I know myself,
and for letting me know myself better than others know me.
Make me, I pray to You, better than they suppose, and forgive me
for what they do not know.**

– Islam, Abu Bakr Moments

13. To study the Buddha way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by the myriad things.
To be enlightened by the myriad things is to free one's body and mind and those
of others.
No trace of enlightenment remains, and this traceless enlightenment is continued
forever.

– Zen Buddhism, Eihei Dogen

14. A Native American Elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner:
'Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog
is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.' When asked which dog
wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, 'The one I feed the most'.

– Native American Elder

15. The reality of man is his thought, not his material body. The thought force and
the animal force are partners. Although man is part of the animal creation, he
possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings.

If a man's thought is constantly aspiring towards heavenly subjects then does he
become saintly; if on the other hand his thought does not soar, but is directed
downwards to centre itself upon the things of this world, he grows more and
more material until he arrives at a state little better than that of a mere animal.

– `Abdu'l-Bahá, from the Bahá'í Writings

16. The Master said: 'Wealth and rank are what men desire, but unless they be obtained in the right way they may not be possessed. Poverty and obscurity are what men detest; but unless prosperity be brought about in the right way, they are not to be abandoned.

If a man of honor forsake virtue how is he to fulfill the obligations of his name?

A man of honor never disregards virtue, even for the space of a single meal. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it; in seasons of peril he cleaves to it.

– *The Analects, from the sayings of Confucius*

17. O Befriended Stranger!

The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power, quench it not with the contrary winds of self and passion. The healer of all thine ills is remembrance of Me, forget it not. Make My love thy treasure and cherish it even as thy very sight and life.

O Offspring Of Dust!

Be not content with the ease of a passing day, and deprive not thyself of everlasting rest. Barter not the garden of eternal delight for the dust-heap of a mortal world. Up from thy prison ascend unto the glorious meads above, and from thy mortal cage wing thy flight unto the paradise of the Placeless.

– *Bahá'u'lláh, from The Hidden Words*

Please join us for refreshments



All Soul Food programs are available for free download from

www.soulfood.com.au

About Soul Food

Soul Food is a monthly event held at the State Library of Victoria, providing an opportunity to relax in a tranquil environment and reflect on inspiring themes. It features music, audio-visual pieces and readings from various Faiths; indigenous, ancient and modern, from all over the world. Soul Food is a free community event open to all.

Venue

State Library of Victoria
Village Roadshow Theatre
Corner Swanston St & La Trobe St
(Enter via La Trobe Street)

Time

10.30am – 11.30am

Dates

First Sunday of every month:
Sunday October 5th, 2008
Sunday November 2nd, 2008
Sunday December 7th, 2008

Further Information

For further information about Soul Food events in Victoria, South Australia or Western Australia please call 0402 245 752 or visit www.soulfood.com.au.

Study Circles

In response to interest from Soul Food guests, the Bahá'í community is now offering a series of regular 'Study Circles' – as an opportunity to further explore subjects related to spiritual development. Study Circles are small, informal groups, and provide an environment in which to discuss meaningful topics with like-minded people. The first Study Circle is titled "Reflections on the Life of the Spirit", from the Ruhi Study Circle series. It is a three unit study on; Understanding the Bahá'í Writings, Prayer & Meditation, and Life & Death.

If you enjoy Soul Food then a Study Circle may also appeal to you. For more information please contact 0402 245 752 or email soulfoodvic@gmail.com.

The Bahá'í Community of Victoria

Soul Food is an initiative of the Bahá'í Community of Victoria. For further information about the Bahá'í Faith please visit www.bahai.org.au. For books on the Bahá'í Faith and related subjects such as spiritual development, world religion, education and more please visit:

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