

The University Saved My Soul  
An invited lecture at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, Ohio  
August 23, 2009  
Steve Hays, Department of Classics and World Religions  
Ohio University

I'm glad to be among you today. I hope you won't mind if I don't spend any time on what the ancient rhetorical theorists called *captatio benevolentiae*—winning the goodwill of the audience; either through humor or homeyness or any such thing. Time for serious thinking is always too short, and everything I have heard about this fellowship leads me to believe that you are a people accustomed to thinking seriously. So I'll jump right in.

I cannot agree with conservative Christians who wring their hands about the ungodly university and claim that it is destroying students' souls. I have often, in fact, told my conservative friends in so many words that the university saved my soul and enabled me to love God by teaching me how to think carefully. Some of them find that claim virtually incomprehensible. I suspect that this fellowship will find it more reasonable. Even so, I would like to take a few minutes to explain what I mean and why I believe not only that academics saved my soul, but that saving souls is one of the university's most important and proper functions.

The notion of soul (if not the word) has been integral to my thinking from the time I was a young boy. It recently occurred to me that the beginning of my conception of the soul may have been when my parents taught me how to respond to insults from other children: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." I don't think that is a particularly wise or insightful thing to teach children, but nonetheless it pushed me to think about "me" and the bones that sticks and stones could break. As I thought about that, I decided that the part of me that words *could* hurt might really be more important than the bones that sticks and stones could break. That view was strengthened at the age of six when I met a boy in our town who was missing several fingers—lost in a foolish game to an older sibling with a hatchet. His name was Larry. He was a couple of years older than I was, and I was always afraid of him, in part, because of his missing fingers. And then, one day, wandering down an alley alone, I ran into him and could not avoid talking to him. I remember the shock of discovering that I liked him—that even though he had not merely broken bones, but missing fingers, *he* was whole and likeable and good. This idea was pushed further by considering men in real life and movies who had lost legs or arms. It dawned on me that though their *bodies* were maimed and diminished by their amputations, *they* were not. By the time I was about ten I began to *get* honor. I began to understand, for example, that simple things like stealing change from my father's pants and lying when confronted about it diminished *me* in a profound way. I concluded that I would rather lose fingers as Larry had than continue to willingly exchange my honor for pocket change—as I had often done. This is all to say that at quite an early age I became convinced that what mattered about me was not my bones or my fingers or even my limbs, but what I thought of at the time as *me* and what I can now call just as comfortably *my soul*. My boyhood experience convinced me that certain kinds of thinking and action could make *me* better or make *me* worse, and most days I really wanted *me* to be better. So it was that as a young boy I developed a rudimentary sense of notions of soul, sin, and virtue (though I didn't use those words), and I was on the verge of developing a conception of God.

In my early teenage years I began taking church seriously, and it very nearly destroyed my soul—*me*. The church we attended was the one my mother had grown up in—the very fundamentalist Churches of Christ, the Southern variety that regard even instrumental music in church as sinful. My young desire to be good was naïve and credulous, and throughout my middle school and high school years I tried to conform my notions of goodness to the doctrines that were preached in that church. I think it was there that I first learned to use the word *soul* and to use it in a way that I now deplore as ignorant and superstitious. In church I learned to think that the valuable part of me that needed to be protected was not *me*, but something different from *me*—*my soul*.

I was a smart kid, but my family didn't do much careful thinking and arguing. Mom believed what the preachers said. Dad wanted no part of church and simply ignored it all as silliness. No one taught me that doubting, questioning, refining of beliefs was right and responsible. In church such things were condemned as disbelief.

So it was that during my turbulent teenage years, I learned to think of my *soul* as something that replaced my body after death. The only identifiable quality that was ever attributed to the soul in my church experience was, so far as I can recall, that the soul had the capacity to suffer eternal torture if I did bad things. The task of my life as presented by my religious teachers was to obey divine laws so scrupulously that I would not be found guilty of bad things and so my *soul* would not be thrown into eternal fire. I lived those teenage years just about as scrupulously as any kid could. I violated my beliefs a few times, and I experienced those violations as white hot torture to my conscience. I followed all the rules, and all the while I grew angrier and more unhappy. I hated both God and my church, yet clung to both with what I conceived of as faithfulness. Throughout my high school years in small-town East Texas I felt (rightly, I think) that I was barely clinging to my sanity and my life, and I felt overcome with exhaustion. I remember sleepless nights, longing to let go and plummet into the comfort of madness or nonexistence. Competing against that exhaustion, though, was a profound hope: College. I had somehow conceived the expectation that if I could just get out of the ignorance of our town, I would find *the truth* at college. And so, I dug in and studied hard and hoped I could hang on till college.

I won't burden you with details about my college years. In fact, I want to telescope and distill my academic work and merely say this about the overall experience. I discovered a value that I had not been clearly introduced to either in public school or in church or in my family: a fundamental commitment to honest inquiry, revulsion at the notion of putting my intellectual thumb on the scales to make my own beliefs look better, a conviction (as one professor put it) that "God doesn't have anything to fear from the truth: He made it." Or, as I would now be more inclined to say, "God doesn't have anything to fear from the truth: He is it."

So, the Academy taught me skepticism in place of dogmatism. By skepticism I do not mean contemptuous highbrow cynicism. I mean *skepticism* as Plato's Socrates practiced it: recognizing the deficiencies both of his own understanding and of the accepted wisdom of his society, and engaging in a careful, honest, passionate search for better understanding.

The process of academic skepticism—of *seeking* truth instead of assuming that I knew it—was often very painful. It involved the slow dissolution of virtually everything I had believed from my teenage years, repudiation of the religious tradition my wife and I had grown up in, and the withering of many hopes and friendships among our old church circles. I have often likened academic inquiry to purifying gold. If my memory of high school chemistry is correct, gold is impervious to even the strongest of common acids: sulfuric, hydrochloric, nitric (so long as you don't combine those last two). Consequently, if you have a prized heirloom that is reputedly pure gold, you can drop it into a beaker of concentrated hydrochloric, enjoy a relaxing coffee break (or for that matter a year or two in the South of France), and come back to find your heirloom—if it really is pure gold—completely unharmed, perhaps a bit brighter for the treatment. But if the heirloom is not pure gold, whatever is not gold will be gone, dissolved into the acid.

I think we don't actually have heirlooms made of pure gold. It's simply too soft. It needs other kinds of metals to help it hold its shape. And, it's certainly the case that not everything we believe can be 100% true. We need to weave the great truths into stories and other intellectual constructs that will help them hold their shapes through the hard use we humans must give our beliefs. Nonetheless, it is important to get some sense of whether the beliefs we treasure actually contain any gold or whether they are entirely valueless—silly treasures made of Play Dough or mud pies. The Academy compelled me to doubt and question everything I had once believed was truth itself. Over time the acid destroyed almost all of those beliefs.

When I was younger I would have been terrified at the prospect of the dissolution of so many of my beliefs, but it didn't actually turn out to be a terrible experience at all. The notion that the churches of Christ somehow knew the truth and every one else had to learn that truth and become like us... Well, that was gone. And it was a mighty relief not to pretend any more. And the list of *really bad sins* that included everything concerned with hormones and excluded almost any challenge to the wealthy and privileged—that tacitly permitted even self-satisfied, cold-blooded greed and brutal racism: That list was gone. And the notion that a particular book records something like dictation from God—that was gone. So also was the notion of God as a bean-counting psychopathic judge who thought he was right to eternally torture not only me, but also virtually all the rest of well-intentioned, but fallible humanity. I experienced the loss of those beliefs, I think, as a cancer patient experiences the loss of a tumor; as a slave experiences the loss of beatings and manacles. The dissolution of some beliefs is—as time makes clear—liberty and health and joy and life.

Nonetheless, in my experience and I think necessarily in anyone's experience, there was some little bit of gold left in the bottom of the beaker after all those false beliefs had been dissolved. The concept of *soul*, preserved by faithful people in many ancient and thoughtful traditions and present in my own childhood intuitions remained. I learned that at the roots of great enduring traditions one usually finds thinkers who were really smart and perceptive—even if their contemporary followers appear to be dumb as rocks. People like Plato and Jesus contemplated the powerful human passion to become better than we are; to do good things even if it costs us money or social status or even health or survival. They located that strange passion in our *souls*, and they were more concerned about the health of the *soul* than the health of the body. Those thinkers showed me that my childish intuitions about the soul were neither foolish nor unimportant. I discovered that there were serious and thoughtful ways to talk about who we are at our core, about what as a boy I called *me*. They used the notion of *soul* and they were not incompetent fools like the preachers of my youth.

What's more, virtually all the great thinkers who cared about the soul in Classical antiquity, also believed in what they called *God*. They did not mean *God* as the church of my youth did. They meant something like: whatever it is that is ultimately and absolutely real. In our times for most people that ultimate reality is matter-energy. If that modern view is correct, then matter-energy can quite appropriately be called *God*. I hope that modern view is wrong, because if it is right, then it seems to me that human life remains hopelessly sundered: On one side of a great chasm lies reality, and it consists only of things like money, and fingers, and bones, and atom bombs—all of which are real because they are matter-energy; on the other side of the chasm are the things that matter most to me (and perhaps to many of you)—love, justice, mercy, compassion, joy—but they are *not* real. These things *seem* to our minds to be of great importance, but in the world of matter-energy, they can be found only in our brains. Unlike our thoughts about fingers and money and atom bombs, which are present in our brains as neuro-chemical realities, but which are also present as real objects in the world of matter-energy, justice and mercy are not *things* outside our brains. They cannot be isolated, tested. They cannot be subjected to chemical analysis—either of quality or quantity. They are not real in the same way that fingers and dollars and guns are real.

The thinkers I most love, however, do not think that all reality is ultimately reducible to matter-energy. Some of them believe in the gulf between the material and the non-material, but those thinkers do not believe that matter is on the side of ultimate reality. They believe that things like justice are a deeper and truer reality even than matter. They believe, that is, that qualities that we can only dimly understand—justice, right, goodness, those things that sing to us like the well at the world's end, that sometimes whisper to us and sometimes shout and urge us to risk loss of money, comfort, even of life to get closer to what is good... They believe that that deep goodness is more real than matter-energy. They believe that *it* is God. Jesus and Paul, of course, believed something even weirder about ultimate reality: They believed that in some sense it is *conscious* of us and *loves* us, that the closest we can get to understanding the relationship between the soul that longs for goodness and the

ultimate goodness it longs for is to liken it to the relationship between children who love their parents and the parents who love them.

I need to emphasize that academic inquiry does not *prove* that qualities like justice are fundamental to reality. Far less does it prove that reality loves us. It does, however, reveal careful thinking and good reasons for hoping that such things might be true. It does reveal that these ideas are not merely the dogmatic rantings of ignorant small town East Texas preachers. Academic inquiry does reveal smart, honest inquirers who followed the evidence (rightly or wrongly) to ideas which for some of us appear to be treasures containing pure gold. By dissolving what is obviously foolishness and nonsense, academic inquiry allows us to see more clearly great treasures that are at least plausible. That's an important accomplishment.

I would like to close with a few brief comments about the contemporary university. Generally American universities are now seen as important because they sustain American economic, political, and military advantages. Politicians tell kids that they must go to college so they can earn a good living. Politicians tell taxpayers they must support teaching and research so that our corporations can stay ahead of the Japanese and Chinese. For the most part, university administrators and trustees echo those views. I don't know when I last heard an administrator or politician assert that one core mission of the university is to *challenge* the status quo—to help students immerse their assumptions and beliefs in the strong acid of academic inquiry to strip away what is foolish or nonsensical and to encourage them to build stronger, better understanding. Universities have ceased to boast that they push students to challenge the notions of what is just and good and *what should be* that they have learned from high school, parents, and television so that better, more refined beliefs can guide and shape their souls. As a faculty member, I would follow straight into bankruptcy or hell a president who would dare to persistently insist that that is one of the central functions of the university. Instead, presidents boast of *conforming* to the status quo as defined by “successful” business people, politicians, and Excel spreadsheets.

This is not merely a theoretical discussion. The collective soul of contemporary America is profoundly ill. It needs the therapy of careful thinking. The evidence of this illness is all around us: We have acquiesced in torture and the destruction of innocent nations; we have chosen to adjust the brain chemistry of some 25% of our citizens (young and old) with psychotropic drugs rather than repairing the distorted lifestyles and expectations that make them unable to function; our sense of civic obligation and human decency is so impaired that we cannot even decide to develop a decent health care system for our fellow citizens. The academic practice that saved *me, my soul*—the wonderful skepticism of the acid bath—has not entirely disappeared from the university, but it has become an embarrassment, a vestigial and scarcely functioning limb of the historic university.

As an academic in the humanities, I observe something very important and ironic, and in my classes in various ways I try to expose it to the acid of honest examination. Belief in God is almost entirely absent from the places our society thinks it is most present. For example, the religious conservatives who claim to believe in God and not to believe in evolution have secretly been converted to the intuitive power of Darwinian argument. They scream against teaching evolution in biology classes, but they cannot find in themselves a persuasive argument against social and economic Darwinism. They *believe* that the richest and most powerful have a right to gain ever more at the expense of everyone else. They *believe* in an absolutely free market. Trying to control economics in the interests of justice and mercy, they believe, must necessarily fail. These good neighbors of ours, who say they believe in God, have actually come to believe that economic dynamics are truer and stronger than justice and mercy. The academy has taught me what that means: They really believe that capitalist markets are stronger than the God of mercy and justice they say they believe in. In fact, they have come to believe that money and power *are* God. In a strange and terrible irony, many of our religiously conservative friends believe that the survival of the fittest is ultimately true—that Darwinism is God. And just as ironically, belief in the power of good and right, the love of what is best—that is faith in, commitment to, and love of God—are

flourishing where they are least expected: among the artists and actors, among ecologists and other scientists who consider themselves atheists, among people who have never stepped through the door of a church.

The point is this: We live in a time when it is easy and often acceptable—even at the university—to casually accept a fracturing of human communities along false and unnecessary lines. The primary mechanism for reuniting people of goodwill who have been divided along the false categories of religious and unreligious is, I think, careful thinking. Careful thinking can help dissolve the ill-considered vocabulary and empty traditions that so unnecessarily divide us, and it can replace those divisions with an awareness of certain broad and important beliefs and commitments that really unite us. In the process it will help us to define where the real and proper fracture lines are: commitments to justice as opposed to commitments to self-advancement at all costs; mercy as opposed to meanness. Things like that. One of the university's most proper functions is to clarify what really divides and unites us and to call us to a careful quest for what is really best.

My personal experience, I suspect, is not all that different from yours. My soul has longed from its earliest days to be good. It turns out that being good requires (among other things) careful thought—critical as well as constructive: It's tough to be good if you hold to facile, jingoistic, and wrong-headed notions of what *good* really is. So, I'm thankful to the academy, which did what in an ideal world my family and my church might have done. It taught me careful thinking of a sort that has allowed me not only to get a job and make money, but also (vastly more important) to live with legitimate purpose, based on the conviction that goodness is the ultimate essence of reality. Or, as the theologians would say, the university taught me the kind of thinking that has allowed me to believe in and love God.