

Writer's Note:

*Many hours of research has led up to these beliefs, and I think that most of this paper is personal and reflective—an analysis of myself and what I believe in. I have taken all previous thoughts and memories and combined them into a discussion of my own experiences and beliefs.*

There is something within us that makes us who we are. Whether it is a medley of our own experiences, an immortal thing that will live on past your flesh, or a being of light, we are innately different. The soul, a concept that has been discussed for thousands of years, is that “something” that makes us who we are. The soul is light, the soul is our thoughts, the soul is our desires, the soul is our personality. The soul, for me, is the embodiment of everything the person is, was, and isn’t. I have always imagined it as a being of light, or an orb, like a star. It embodies everything; sub-conscious, dreams, thoughts, personality. I believe that since our minds and our impact on the world is boundless, so our souls must be as well. The word and definition of the soul confines the idea. Our mortal bodies confine the soul. It can’t be defined or confined at all. I cannot define the soul. Tying the idea of the soul to a word instantly restricts it. Same with the word “universe”. How can you place something so small and constrictive to a concept so big and unknown? I can only define what experiences have led me to believe that we are not just bodies but something metaphysical as well.

\* \* \*

My dad once told me that stars are good souls watching over us from heaven. He told me that my grandfather was one of those stars. Later, in my room, I sat on the windowsill, stuffed animal in hand, and picked one out for him. I picked the brightest one I could see. The window was cold against my skin, and my breath made the glass opaque. Satisfied, I crawled back into my bed.

As a child, I think this is one of the experiences that tied me so strongly to the metaphysical world. This was my first belief of the soul.

\* \* \*

I wiped the sweat off of my face, and my feet padded against the uneven pavement of Phenom Penh. Behind me, several other students fanned themselves in the heat of Cambodia. We stopped in front of a gated area surrounded by beautiful white walls. Our translator and guide entered first, and the rest of us followed. Within it, there were monks dressed in the vibrant colors of the sun sitting on the steps of intricate buildings or riding bikes. They glanced at us, some with no emotion, some smiled. We entered a simple building with one room. A bamboo mat was spread out on the floor and an altar was placed at the front of the room. Three monks sat cross-legged under the altar, dressed in red, orange, and yellow. They looked like they had stepped out of a Buddhist tapestry, lotus flowers and all. One was a young man, another middle-aged, the last old bearing circular glasses.

Before we arranged ourselves on the mat, each one of us bowed in respect toward the Buddhist monks. The eldest monk spoke, khmer rolling of his tongue like a bird’s song, and our translator instructed us to go into meditation.

I closed my eyes, and soon I began to impatiently squirm. I was struggling to meditate—I would peek open my eyes to see what the other people were doing, and then scold myself for lack of concentration. I felt restless, like I was trying to sleep but couldn’t find a comfortable position. Then, like I fell asleep, slow and then all at once, I slipped into meditation. My mind was a river, a white space, the night sky, I was floating above the city. I couldn’t quiet down my mind. I felt boundless, like my mind was

leaking. Finally, there was an ocean, and with each inhale a wave broke against the sand. I felt water on my face as the monks splattered us with water using lotus flowers, I thought it was sea spray. Reality hit me like a slap in the face. The room seemed smaller and my clothes constrictive. The red string they tied around our wrists to end the ceremony was a constant reminder of the constrictiveness and boundlessness I had experienced in that room. It was meant for protection, but for me it was a physical representation of the ritual that expanded my mind.

\*

\*

\*

My feet dangled several inches from the ground and I squirmed in my Sunday dress. I had to jump off the bench to stand as the priest called us to rise. It was Christmas and the church was aglow with beautiful decorations and filled with warmth. The choir sang; the harmony reaching up into the rafters above. My father's big hands pointed to the lyrics in a book. I looked up, there were tears running down his face as he sang. How could religion affect someone so much? But now I realize that my father wasn't crying for Jesus, but because of the voices that rose in celebration of hope and giving. Religion has nothing to do with it. Community, human contact, and having a voice are all components to the desires within us.

\*

\*

\*

The attic smelled musky, like dirt and smoke. I looked around me at the familiar faces of my family and then my eyes rested on the Peruvian shaman sitting in front of us. His face was slightly wrinkled and he was dressed simply in a tunic and jeans. His wife blended into the shadows, seeing but not being seen. He passed a bag of dried cocoa leaves around and I took a small handful. In the center of us was a small candle, its light illuminating the entire room. He made eye contact with each of us, and I wondered what he thought of the tourist family in front of him; did we look like fools or wise travelers? Did he think lowly of us? The question made me squirm, I hated tourists back home and I felt out of place here.

"Is everyone ready?" He asked.

"Yes," My father said and we all nodded. He began by reciting chants in Quechua, an ancient, native language to Peru, and laid out a woven cloth which instantly reminded me of the baby blanket my grandmother had knitted for me. On that cloth, he sprinkled colored sand in circular formations.

"Tell me about your fears of this year, yes?"

We each went around and told him. I don't remember what I said, maybe something about grades. He continued with the altar and the chants, putting on various things; a llama's fetus, candy, stones, herbs that stung my nose, dried flowers, and bones. The candle wax dripped on the floor and his wife sometimes whispered to him in quick Spanish. I watched his crooked hands place each of the objects meticulously on the altar, I watched his mouth move and I watched my parents with the candlelight dancing on their face. The air was heavy with deep thoughts and his voice sliced through it like a knife. The only time he moved was to go around to each of us and slid his hands down our backs to rid of us bad spirits and it was over. He folded the cloth over and shook hands with my father.

“I will bury this later, so your fears will be gone for good,” He handed the cloth to his wife and gave me a small nod. As a thirteen year old, I never really knew the extent of what I had just experienced. It was something about that ritual that expanded my mind and my heart to possibilities that I hadn’t realized until later. The ritual made me realized that resorting to spiritual practices and the metaphysical world is a constant comfort to human beings.

\*

\*

\*

The soul embodies all desires. We desire comfort from fears, and like the shaman in Peru, we create rituals that will rid us of those fears. We go to church, like my dad, seeking ease from the company of others. We desire knowledge and freedom, like the goal of the Buddhist monks in Cambodia. All of these desires are innate that we have built physical rituals and comforts to ease and fulfill these desires. The soul is innate yet I believe that it is not contained to the outlines of our bodies.

Whenever I find myself at the edge of an ocean, underneath the great expanse of stars, or soaring above the surface of clouds, I wonder why the unknown and the great fascinate me. And it’s not just the large expanses of the universe that mesmerizes me to no end, it’s the creases in my grandmother’s hand, or the blueness of his eyes, the melody in a song, or the small patterns on a leaf. I believe it’s because everything contains everything, whether in the form of a memory or the form of that form. I believe that we so infinitely large, like the ocean, or the stars, or the horizon, and so small like the details of our skin. Humans are bigger on the inside. We are walking universes of memory and thoughts and dreams and likes and dislikes. We are tiny details on the skin of the earth yet oceans in a lover’s eyes. That is what the soul is, the indefinable container of everything and nothing that makes us who we were, who we are, and who we ever will be.

## Sources

"Afterlife V. Persia, India, and China." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2010*. Ed. Robert L. Fastiggi. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2010. 19-20. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: This article includes the Persian, Indian, and Chinese views on the after life and death. It provides a quick summary on where the soul is believed to go after death in each belief.

Abumrad, Jad, and Sean Cole. "When Am I Dead?" *Radiolab*. Web.

Notes: A really compelling radio talk on the after life and death. It starts off with a story of a physician who believed that the soul had weight and tried to measure it as it exited the body. Includes multiple stories and questions like: "when are you really dead, or gone? What really happens after you die?" Includes theories on death and the afterlife.

Audi, Robert. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press: New York. 1999. Print.

Notes: The definition of the Soul in The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy is short, sweet, and clear. It provides three views from Descartes, Aristotle, and Plato and summarizes the basic idea of the soul in philosophy.

Macgregor, Geddes. "Soul: Christian Concept." *World Religions*. New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, 1987. Macmillan Compendium. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: "Soul Christian Concept" is an article on the three main views on the soul within Christianity: creationism, traducianism, and reincarnationism. It includes how the view on the soul changed throughout history and the main teachers of these three concepts. These teachers include: Origen (c.185-c.254), Thomas Aquinas, and Pope Benedict XII.

Ivry, Alfred L. "Body and Soul." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 30-31. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: this article consists of the Judaism's view on the soul. This includes concepts of the Talmudic rabbis, excerpts from the Midrash, and medieval Jewish rabbis. To summarize, the main belief is that the soul sees but is not seen, just like God.

"Jain Belief on the Soul." *BBC News*. BBC, 10 Sept. 2009. Web.

This is a short and sweet overview of the Jain belief of the soul. Jainism is an ancient religion from India. They believe that the soul, of the "jiva" exists forever and can be liberated from the cycle of life through basic behavior principles. They believe that a life of nonviolence and a spiritual independence is the way to liberation. They believe that the soul is responsible for its action and must suffer consequences in its mortal lifetimes.

Hoffman, Frank J. "Mind and Mental States in Buddhist Philosophy." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Donald M. Borchert. 2nd ed. Vol. 6. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. 253-258. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: This article provides a summary of Buddhist philosophies. This summary includes information and the history of the belief as well as traditions, definitions, and terms of the religion. In Buddhist beliefs, the soul is also the conscious, which can achieve nirvana through meditation, freedom, and enlightenment.

Lorenz, Hendrik. "Ancient Theories of Soul." Stanford University. 2003. Web.

Notes: "Ancient Theories of the Soul" is a thorough and extensive work on different beliefs of the soul. This includes Plato's, Socrates, Aristotle's, Hellenistic, Epicurus', and the Stoic theory on the soul. The author compares and contrasts each one while providing a meticulous explanation of each one.

Olson, Robert G. *A Short Introduction to Philosophy*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003. Print.

Notes: This well written source provides clear snippets of different views of the soul. Atomism is explained really well in relation to the soul. This source provides a well-written summary of Aristotle's and Plato's views on the soul.

"Afterlife V. Persia, India, and China." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2010*. Ed. Robert L. Fastigi. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2010. 19-20. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: This article includes the Persian, Indian, and Chinese views on the after life and death. It provides a quick summary on where the soul is believed to go after death in each belief.

Abumrad, Jad, and Sean Cole. "When Am I Dead?" *Radiolab*. Web.

Notes: A really compelling radio talk on the after life and death. It starts off with a story of a physician who believed that the soul had weight and tried to measure it as it exited the body. Includes multiple stories and questions like: "when are you really dead, or gone? What really happens after you die?" Includes theories on death and the afterlife.

Blake, William "Soul parts with dead body." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 2nd ed. Vol. 13. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: This is an illustration done by one of my favorite artists: William Blake. The clairvoyant artist, the artist who claimed to see much more than the normal eye could. In this illustration, he depicts a woman or "soul" departing from a male's dead body.

"The Soul of the Released." *Encyclopedia of India*. Ed. Stanley Wolpert. Vol. 4. Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006. 283-285. *World History in Context*. Web. 12 Nov. 2013.

Notes: This is a primary source from The Thirteen Principle Upanishads, translated from Sanskrit and annotated. It includes the belief that the released soul can become the God of Creation and certain aspects of what the soul consists of. It also claims that the soul is equal to knowledge.

Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown. 1991. Print.

Notes: Compares a soul to a "pearl". To achieve immortality in the material world one must develop an existence that will remain in people's mind. That the boundaries of a person does not equal the boundaries of their body.

A Tatanua mask for inhabitation by the soul of the deceased in Malagan funerary rites. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 10. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: This is a mask from Papua New Guinea which was carved to be a home for the soul after it left the body.

Marmura, Michael E. "Soul: Islamic Concepts." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 12. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. Web.

Notes: This article is divided into four parts: traditional, theological, philosophical, and mystical. Each one has compelling view points with somethings in common, mostly religion and God.

Rivière, Claude. "Soul: Concepts in Indigenous Religions." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 12. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 8531-8534. *World History in Context*. Web.

Notes: Different historians view on the primitive beliefs of the soul. Religions and myths of indigenous groups are explored and analyzed. Some viewed the individual having several souls, each functioning differently.