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Hi Al,

The following is a slightly edited version of our exchange.

You wrote:

I'm an avid reader, and as part of that I've been reading Parker Palmers "A Hidden Wholeness", and I have to admit: I'm confused about something. Most of the books I've read treat the body and the soul as essentially one cohesive entity, peanut butter and jelly, ham and cheese, until death when they separate; one goes in the ground and one goes off to heaven somewhere. This "seems" to be sort of the standard Christian model of how things go, obviously with some variations depending on who you ask.

But then Parker writes this book, and treats body and soul as if they are entirely two separate things, a total duality of existence, and he talks about the soul being "shy", and only showing up "When it feels safe". He leaves the reader feeling like "You're on your own" most of the time..... So no wonder you're such a mess!

Ok... So the question..... do you know of any authors / books that deal with or discuss this disparate view of the relationship between body and soul?

And my response:

I'll try to make at least a little sense out of this. ☺

First of all, I think you're right that we mostly today think of body and soul as one, since modern science recognizes that our emotions, intellect, will, hopes and dreams, etc., are embodied in our brains, hands, organs, etc. It's all interconnected. We ARE our bodies, not just beings inhabiting bodies.

You mentioned the split of soul and body at death, though. That's a tough one. The more recent Christian model seems to be "soul goes to heaven when you die," though this belief may be more indebted to ancient Greek thought (which saw the body as a shackle for the soul) then for Biblical, Jewish thought (which hoped for the resurrection of the dead, meaning that when you die, you'd just dead, you're not anywhere, other than maybe in God's mind, until God breathes life back into you and raises you from the dead). We don't have to accept that view, but that's more traditional, I think. A good book on that topic is NT Wright's "Surprised by Hope."

But to Palmer, more importantly. I think when Palmer refers to the "soul" he's talking about something different. He speaks in a similar manner to Richard Rohr and others who've been influenced by Jungian psychology--this idea that our "true self" is there, buried beneath layers, needing to be found.

I like and don't like this way of thinking about humans. You could argue that it's very Quaker--to look for the light within, our true self. I would argue it's more Quaker to believe that the light is not something fully there but hidden, but something that we develop and cultivate. What George Fox and William Penn called the "kernel" or "seed" of God, waiting to be nurtured. So the spiritual quest is not about looking for something already there but hidden but cultivating something that is there but "young" and awaiting growth.

I think when Palmer speaks of soul he means the "meaty" part of us--our talents, our dreams, our hopes, the part of us that loves and wants to be loved, etc. As we live life, this part of us gets stifled--by people telling us "no," by our fears of failure, but people who've abused or belittled us, etc. He's calling us to be authentic, meaning, let who you are be known, because the world is better off (and you are better off) when you share your authentic self with the world. But our "souls" are scared, because sometimes people don't want us to be authentic for any number of reasons...it's less threatening, maybe.

So don't hear Palmer saying "the part of you that lives forever" when he says soul, although you could say that the essence of who we are does endure forever, no matter what the great beyond looks like. Hear him saying, "the essence of what makes you human--your capacity to love, hope, create, enjoy, etc."

As far as other authors, I'd have to think about this. Maybe Carolyn Walker Bynum's "Resurrection of the Body"? She's a religious historian who has written some fabulous stuff. I'll try to think of other resources.

Hope this helps!