

# The Lightness of the Soul

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Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Every word we speak and every action we perform affects our future.

—Pema Chödrön

Welcoming the Unwelcome—Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here, at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is The Lightness of the Soul.

Much in the world is heavy right now. It's good to be present to that. It's good to be present in a balanced way, for the health of joy...because our joy is deeply bound up in the expression of our grief. It's important to break free of grief sometimes and find the lightness of things...because the opposite is also true. Our grief is deeply bound up in the expression of our joy. In a simple, woven basket, these two things coexist.

A great teacher that I know reminds me always to look for the beauty that is here, surprisingly—right here in our laps and in the stars above, patiently waiting for us around every corner in life and in every little corner of the sky that holds a galaxy or two.

Let's pause for just a moment...to honor all that is, all that we love and we have lose and we have find...in the living of our lives. [pause] To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

Last year, on September the 11<sup>th</sup>, I did something dumb. I meant to do, I had fun doing it. And I'd do it again. Fully clothed, I picked up the Sunday morning flowers. I held them to my heart as I prayerfully honored the flag in the name of those we lost and have lost since 2001. I walked out to the edge of the shallow part of that water and I fell right on into Silver Lake. It was pretty awesome...and pretty ridiculous...and pretty fun. All at once.

My good friend, Zach, filmed the whole thing for me. I still have it on my phone. We shared it in the service that took place on Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> and I worked with Diane and Don Ransome so that it would make

good sense in the service. Together, it seemed, the four of us had a little lighthearted fun.

I like things that are light. I feel like we could all use a little levity these days...a little bit of fun...a little bit of lightness, maybe. They say that the human soul weighs only 21 grams. It's just so very light. You could carry the soul in the back pocket of a pair of blue jeans... You could carry the souls of others around without much noticing. Just 21 grams. The soul is light. It's more or less the weight of a stack of five nickels, more or less the weight of a humming bird or the weight of a chocolate bar.

I was thinking about the weight of the human soul when I jumped into the water. I wondered if its lightness would buoy me. When I think of the lightness of the soul, I think of a woman named Simone Weil. We've talked about her before. She wrote that book called *Gravity and Grace*. I've quoted from it...from the section in which she says that, "ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception." I was depending on her. I needed her to be right...when I walked to the edge of the shallow part of the water and let myself fall in. I needed her to be right. I needed the yearnings of my heart to be filled with grace. I needed the movements of my soul to buoy me...but not quite in the ways that science would imply.

Science knows better than faith when it comes to jumping into Silver Lake. Science knows that exceptions to the law of gravity depend upon the concept of displacement...because the weight of five nickels will sink quickly into the water but a hummingbird will float upon its surface...and the chocolate bar...well, I suppose it depends on the density of the chocolate. I'd need to make an appeal to Aiden or to Forrest or to Lexi to find that out. I'd need to talk to someone who is smarter about chocolate than me...and to someone who has access to a high school science teacher. If left it up to me, it would be trial and error and I'd end up wasting a lot of chocolate and I feel like I would pay some sort of social cost for that...not so much for littering the lake, it seems to me...and maybe not even for potentially sickening the wildlife that might eat it but for wasting all that chocolate tasty goodness.

I am not a big fan of chocolate. I never have been. Not even as a kid...so, of course, I was very popular on Halloween, as you can imagine...especially with my sister who LOVES the stuff. I'm the only one in my family who doesn't love the taste and my mom disowns me

every time the subject comes up in conversation. It's cute. You know how some family things aren't cute anymore...and you're the only one who knows? This is not like that. This is a family thing that stayed cute...over all these years...and my sister still happily accepts whatever chocolate comes my way. Unapologetically, I might add.

For some of us, chocolate is food for the soul but—once again—not quite in the ways that science would imply. Science knows better than faith when it comes to the densities of chocolate, when it comes to the displacement values of different kinds of chocolate. Lo and behold, there exists a science for all things—a science for all provable, predictable, physical and natural things, that is. Even science has its limitations.

I've become interested in science again...after many years of indifference. I loved it in high school—the learning, the logic, the lab reports—but then, I was done. I loved the big-picture concepts but I didn't care and all the minutiae...and in college, science is ALL about the minutiae and it turned me off. I had access to big-picture concept teachers back in high school—Mr. Perka, Mr. Kurczeski in physics, Dr. Evans in chemistry... In college, it was pretty pre-med...pretty cut-throat. They really wasn't my scene. I'm a lover, not a chemist! I thought so anyway...until I encountered a chemistry teacher by the name of Walter White.

Walter White is a fictional character played by Brian Cranston. Walt is the star of the television series, Breaking Bad. It's an absolutely fascinating/absolute tragic six-season show about power and powerlessness, about deception and addiction and love. It's great. The show won lots of awards. Brian Cranston won lots of awards and I may closely study the character that he developed for the show at some point.

The character that he developed—his character, a man named Walter White—this guy is very important to the show on many levels. The level of Walter White that is useful for us this morning is the level that focuses on him as a teacher of chemistry. The viewer learns about this aspect of this character early on—in the pilot episode, actually. I think that the writers did a really great job.

Introducing himself to his students on the first day of chemistry class, he says that, contrary to popular belief, chemistry is not the study of chemicals. He explains, and this I quote,

Technically, chemistry is the study of matter but I prefer to see it as the study of change. Now just think about this. Electrons. They change their energy levels. Molecules. Molecules change their bonds. Elements. They combine and change into compounds. Well, that's...that's all of life. Right? I mean, [change is] the constant. It's the cycle. It's solution and dissolution, over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then transformation. It is fascinating, really.

And the rich guy and the pretty girl are both ignoring him and being a little bit disruptive at the back of the class. Hormones. High school. Bad hair cuts. It's awesome.

The show is superbly written. It flashes back to when Walt was in college at CalTech. It flashed back to the time in which he was deeply in love with Gretchen, fellow student another chemistry major. The two of them were alone in one of the labs, working on a project about the human body. They were analyzing. They were figuring out its chemical composition. Walt says, "Let's break it down. Hydrogen. What does that give us?"

Gretchen answers, "We're looking at 63%."

And Walt says, "63? Wow that is a big bite. My next step's gotta be oxygen."

And Gretchen says, "Oxygen: 26%." They were figuring out—by element and then, by compound—how much of the human body is composed of water. And Gretchen says, "Carbon: 9%...for a total of 98%." And Walt agrees. He's writing all of this down on the lab class chalkboard. It's very cute. The mountains were in the background. The setting sun was in just the right spot. Almost everyone falls in love with someone or with something when the light's like this. We can't really help ourselves. Personally, I've proposed marriage to the western horizon a thousand times...and to the rising sun on the eastern horizon as well but less frequently. I can't always get myself out of bed in time. If she thinks about it—which she does not—the eastern horizon would resent that about me.

Walt and Gretchen go through the rest of the elements that make up the human body. Nitrogen comes in at 1.25% and then the trace elements—calcium, iron, sodium, phosphorus... Then, Walt just does the math and says,

So, the whole thing adds up to 99.888042%. We are .111958% shy... I don't know. Just seems like something's missing, doesn't it? There got to be more to a human being than that.<sup>1</sup>

Then, Walt walks away from the chalkboard and over to where Gretchen is sitting. He leans over her, close enough to kiss and says, "There's nothing but chemistry here."

It is a hokey line and it's stupid and I can't believe that that Gretchen woman fell for it but I know that I did. I loved it all so much. I really loved that part of the show. It made me want to go into chemistry. I could study really hard and somehow find the nerdy girl and drop that line on her and I'd be set. I have a plan. In the fantasy that I'm creating for myself, I'll be a chemist...but I would want to go about it spiritually...but that wouldn't work. I would soon discover that the numbers just wouldn't work out. Not at all. Of course, they wouldn't.

You see, my spiritual approach to the chemistry of the soul would be a long, long way from real science. I would just assume that Walt and Gretchen were on task...that more than 99.8% of every human being is chemical—hydrogen, oxygen and carbon...nitrogen, calcium, iron, sodium, phosphorus. That adds up. It accounts for 99.888042% of our bodies. The remainder, I would assume, is accounted for by the weight of the soul.

But this is where the math just does me in. If 99.888+% of me is chemistry (as detailed above), then something like 0.1119% of me is unaccounted for. In my ridiculous soul-science, this is the weight of a human soul...but if that were actually true... Well, let's check it out.

I weigh about 190 pound. If I lose five pounds, I'll be at my fighting weight. So, 99.888+% of me is chemical. This brings the chemical me in at 189.787+ pounds. The remaining roughly quarter pound of me, presumably, is my soul. That's a pretty heavy soul. I do trend dark and serious but this is too much for me, I think.

They say that the soul is supposed to weigh about 21 grams. According to my pseudo-science, my soul weighs much more than that, coming in at more than 96 grams. So, according to my pseudo-science, my soul is really heavy, far too heavy to be carried without my notice in

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<https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?f=165&t=10047&sid=df861244231a9e6e33bb16e5d9436ea7>

the pocket of my jeans. I feel like my science experiment failed. Maybe, I won't return to chemistry after all.

More than 96 grams... That's a lot. It's like four and a half hummingbirds. It's more than 19 nickels, which is 14 nickels more than 5. I guess, you could say that my soul weighs like 19 nickels and change. For those of you who didn't like my little joke, I can hear you groaning from here and I'm feeling pretty ok about that. What can I say? I have a singular wit. [say overly sincerely] Just know that all I really want is to be loved for who I truly am. [realistically] The point of the 19 nickels joke is to prompt the question: "What kind of change? What kind of change do we need at this time?" [] I don't know if I really saved myself there but if Walter White is right, if chemistry is the study of elemental change, what kind of change can serve us now and help us with our growth?

I'm joking around but it's partly true. Chemistry, even bad chemistry, can teach us a lot about ourselves. Just imagine if what was true within the world of chemistry was also true somehow within the soul. What if we could know ourselves as thoroughly? And what if our knowing was 99.888+% accurate? I don't know if I'd like that...if there were so little left for wonder, if we had only the crumbs of mystery to feed ourselves? What would lift our spirits if this were actually true? What would buoy us? What soul energy would be light enough to take us higher?

Now, personally, just between you and me, I would love answer this question. I would love to blather on about this but I am not perfectly qualified...but I do know of someone who is.

Julia Butterfly Hill is a radical environmentalist. Talk about the lightness of soul! This woman floats. She ascends to impossible heights and she's not magical. She does so physically. She puts herself fully in play—spiritually, intellectually, bodily. More than 20 years ago now, she climbed into controversy...in order to save the life of a redwood tree—180 feet tall and 1,500-year-old—a redwood tree by the name of Luna. She climbed into its upper reaches and she lived there for a little while. She lived there for 738 days, to be exact—from the 10<sup>th</sup> of December in 1997 until the 18<sup>th</sup> of December in 1999. It wasn't so much a protest as it was an active prayer. In those days and ever since, she's been trying to raise the consciousness of a world that often tries its best to ignore her. Here's what Julia Butterfly Hill has to say about what's been keeping us down.

When I think about how we've gotten to this place of being so separated from the Earth and from each other and from our choices, it seems like there are many prongs that have gotten us to this point. I think that one of the core elements though is actually quite simple which is fear.<sup>2</sup>

Fear does so very much to keep us separate. Courage, vulnerability and whole-heartedness...these things call us back into community. We rise by learning how to live together. Our dear Butterfly continues,  
Fear will drive us to make choices that our hearts don't long to make, that our spirits don't long to make. Fear will shut down the voice of the heart and spirit and collapse into beings without meaning and without value.<sup>3</sup>

I hang upon each word she says. Her honesty makes me love her. She goes on to say that our fears manifest in various form of addiction for comfortability. She says,

We are birthing an addict society. I went through a time in my life when I was a major drug and alcohol addict [she confesses] and so, I know on a very real level what addiction is. [In this culture, we need consumerism and we need we need comfortability and we] go through the same withdrawals—the same things you go through as a drug addict or an alcoholic. I see even the most conscious among us making the most unconscious choices out of our addiction to comfortability.<sup>4</sup>

She goes on to talk about what buoys us, about the kind of change we need right now, about the category of the change we need. Somehow, she delivers the heavy news with a heart that's light...with a soul that's light...in keeping with her name—Butterfly.

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So, like I was saying before... Last year, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, I went out to Silver Lake and I jumped right in but the day before I did, I planned it out. I went down to Silver Lake but I went all by myself. I was down there all alone. It was very quiet. It was getting dark. The air was still. The surface of the water was just like glass. I walked out on the stepping stones the lead into the water. The first two or three stones were solid, set securely into the earth. The fourth stone was large and heavy but it teetered about 15°. This did surprise. I stand there often. I know the stone well enough. I can choose whether I want the stone to tip into the lake or not. I decided to let the large stone teeter. I made it tip...and when it did, a perfect set of fresh water ripples started pulsing out across the water. I thought about Oprah Winfrey and the reason is actually obvious.

I thought of Oprah Winfrey. I thought of her sitting in her flower garden, reflecting on her career—25 years, 35,000 interviews. I thought of her sitting in her garden with a new book in her hand. Cracking the binding, reading from it and interviewing the author. Oprah said,

So, we're talking about one of the great awakenings of life lessons. Did you learn about karma or did you already know about karma? I love what you write on page 13. You say,

Every word we speak and every action we perform affects our future. But where do words and actions come from? They all start from our mind. When we indulge in resentment or obsession or self-righteous thinking, we create several problems for ourselves. First, we suffer the immediate pain of those thoughts and emotions. Then, we often act out in ways that cause ourselves and others harm. Finally we reinforce a habit that we would be better off without.

Oprah just sat there quietly. There really wasn't anything to say. So, they both sat there quietly...smiling and then, laughing with each other—Oprah Winfrey and Pema Chödrön—until Pema Chödrön said, "That's pretty good. I think I might be better on paper than in person!" And then, they laughed some more. Their laughter, pulsing out into the world...like gentle ripples...and I felt like singing. I felt like singing Merry Little Christmas, believe it or not. I'm sure it was because of the second line of the carol and not the first.

Have yourself a merry, little Christmas  
Let your heart be light



Let your heart... Let your soul be light... We are free to let these words mean what we wish we could send out into the world—a short stack of nickels, a hummingbird, a chocolate bar, the lightness of the soul...

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.