

We don't have to be soulless or heartless



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

One afternoon, a houseless ("homeless") man named John came to see me out of the rain, out of breath and almost out of his mind. His campsite—tent and belongings—had been bulldozed from beside the railroad tracks just out of town. Without warning, someone in a state office had instructed state workers to "clear the tracks," though no trains had run on those rails for many years. John was not well physically and the stress of living outside and now the added stress of losing his only belongings—including family photographs—was derailing his sanity. He spoke quietly while warming up with a cup of coffee and blanket. I called to get him a shelter bed for the night. Tomorrow was another issue. John survived another day even though someone in an office somewhere decided he and others who took refuge by unused tracks needed to move, now, today.

A person makes a decision that causes harm to others and they don't seem to care. Another treats a vulnerable person like they're subhuman, and shrugs it off. The way some people talk and act, they appear to have no sense or no sense of conscience. Do they even have a soul?

Conscience: "sense of right and wrong, moral sense, inner voice, standards, values, principles, ethics."

We might break it down as "con" (with) plus "science" (knowledge). Conscience has something to do

with the way we think and act "with knowledge"—like the scientific way of asking questions, investigating, searching for the way the world really is, the way people really are.

I've thought about the word "soul" for a long time. No one has ever, to my knowledge, given a good definition of "soul" that makes much sense. Does this refer to the "self," the "personality," the "vital force within" or, like "soul music," refer to feeling, passion, intensity? Apparently, soul is not the same as "mind" but maybe that's where all of this comes from anyway? I wonder.

Which brings me back to a troubling question: Are some people without a soul—soulless? When I watch someone treat another person, or a whole group of people, as if they were not human beings—as if they have no "soul" or "selfhood"—it makes me think this person is not quite a person—there seems to be no feeling or humanity present, only a mask of personhood (persona: "actor's mask"). Are we to judge these people "soulless"? I suppose that would be the same thing they are doing to someone else.

Religion uses the word "soul" as something within us that can be acted upon. A soul can be "healed" or "saved." A soul can live forever, or be damned to hell (living forever while suffering in a soulless place created by a loving god). It may be good for us to remember that religion does not own these words and when people of faith use them they need to define them and be honest about them. One of the most honest things a person can say is "I don't really know what this word means, yet it has meaning for me." If so, we can have a discussion and see if the word is helpful or hurtful.

We struggle to make sense of this. If we're "conscientious" (diligent, careful, attentive) we may be more

concerned to make decisions with others in mind. I often connect conscientiousness to "consciousness"—having an awareness, a mindfulness, rather than a "mindless" disregard for the lives or feelings of others.

Is the "soul" the same as "heart"—the core of our being? If so, it seems important, even critical, that we know ourselves and be "with knowledge" about our fellow human beings.

In his last sermon, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "Be concerned about your brother [and sister] ... Either we go up together, or we go down together." A profoundly humanistic lesson for people of conscience. Our decisions and actions should raise others with us, not put them down. That only brings us all down. Showing compassion to others, doing what we can to bring freedom, justice, health, happiness to others, helps everyone including ourselves.

I don't think the administrator in that state office was soulless or heartless. I only wish they had met John, listened to him, learned about his situation and the lives of so many along those tracks. If only by consciousness and conscientiousness they had "tracked" this one life.

John didn't survive long after he was evicted from his fragile and vulnerable "home" alongside the old rail lines. Many others faced, and continue to face, the same precarious life on the streets.

We might take solace in the fact that being soulless is not our true nature.

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