

“A Hidden Wholeness: Explorations in True Self”
Psalm 139:1-14

Last week a news story caught my attention about a homeless man who was once the mayor of the city of Bend, Oregon. His name was Craig Coyner. One of his former friends, Steve Martin, was working at a homeless shelter helping those in need when Craig greeted him. Martin recognized the voice but did not recognize the man behind the voice. He was a shadow of his former self after years of being homeless. Coyner came from a prominent family and had an acclaimed career as a lawyer, a prosecutor, and then a mayor who helped turn Bend into one of the fastest-growing cities in the country.

Imagine the shock of finding someone who was once a pillar of his community in such a state! Mental illness, addiction, and grief all conspired to strip this man of his potential. Yet, that moment of recognition must have been powerful. “A familiar voice from an unfamiliar face” was the way the New York Times article described Mr. Martin’s experience of encountering his old friend. This struck me as a powerful image for how we can describe our inner reality even if it is masked by an outer reality that does not match it.

We are born with all kinds of potential in life and with the spiritual DNA as part of our makeup and yet along the way, that potential becomes hidden inside of us. Parker Palmer puts it this way, “We are born with a seed of selfhood that contains the spiritual DNA of our uniqueness—an encoded birthright knowledge of who we are, why we are here, and how we are related to others. We may abandon that knowledge as the years go by, but it never abandons us...We arrive in this world undivided, integral, whole. But sooner or later, we erect a wall between our inner and outer lives, trying to protect what is within us or to deceive the people around us. Only when the pain of our dividedness becomes more than we can bear do most of us embark on an inner journey toward living ‘divided no more.’”

Between the deforming forces that assail us and the lure of other things to focus on in life, we are often left living a shadow of our true selves! Like the former mayor of Bend, our soul is deeply hidden under the façades of life. Palmer identifies two streams in our culture that seek our attention away from our true selves: secularism and moralism. The first denies the existence of the soul and our uniqueness, while the second (moralism) denies the importance of caring for our souls.

That is why the spiritual journey is so important for us to recover our deep sense of soul. Psalm 139 gives us a powerful witness to the power of the soul in a time of great fear. Most of the Psalms were written after the exile experience for the people of ancient Israel. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 587 BCE and most of the people were expelled from their homeland to live in Babylon. When we read Psalm 139 in its context of exile, pain, lament, and doubt, we can see that it is a prayer that mixes lament, a call for help and faithfulness, and trust. It is a prayer that acknowledges the challenge and difficulty of living in a world where people violate each other and themselves for the sake of profit and power. Psalm 139 is not separated from all the human illusions of what makes

us happy. Yet, in the midst of all of the struggles of life both inward and outward, Psalm 139, gives us an affirmation of the power and value of the soul.

Let's listen to Psalm 139:1-14

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

One of the great experiences of faith is knowing that God is with us all the time in loving and gentle ways and in all the seasons of our lives and that each of us comes into the world as a unique manifestation of the divine. We are made in the image of God and that reality, no matter how tarnished or hidden it might be, is always there. We live in the illusion that we are separate from God and from others. We sometimes even feel disconnected from ourselves. The main goal of faith is not to make you a moral person or a nicer person, even though these will be the results of faith. Faith is about becoming more aware of our connection to God and to others in the world: Living grounded in our souls.

When we deny the reality of the soul in the world or when we get too busy with life's preoccupations, we live diminished lives filled with unnecessary pain and suffering.

So how might we live each day knowing that we and all others are “fearfully and wonderfully made” in the image of God? How do we stay awake to this reality? Staying connected to our souls is the work of a lifetime and it unfolds slowly. Our faith practices help us to remember each day that we are here on earth to live as God's beloved.

Parker Palmer offers a vision of what this soul life looks like: <https://youtu.be/Qo00-zidiTQ>.

So we are going to try to begin to look at this Mobius strip living. As you walked in, you were given little strips of paper. You are invited to write on the one side about your inner life—your ideas, intuitions, feelings, values, faith, mind, heart, spirit, true self, soul. Write on the other side some of the things that represent your outer life—the image, influence, and impact you project. Instead of forming a circle/a ring with the strip, the invitation is to form a Mobius strip. Take that strip of paper you have been holding in the shape of a circle, pull the two ends slightly apart, give one end a half-twist, and then rejoin the two ends. You have just created a remarkable form called a Mobius strip. The Mobius strip was discovered by German mathematician August Ferdinand Mobius. In mathematics, the Mobius strip is a surface with only one side and one boundary. If you trace your finger on what seems to be the outside, you find yourself suddenly on what seems to be the inside. But if you continue, you will find yourself back on what seems to be the outside. This is a great image for the integrated life where the soul has center stage. If life is a Mobius strip, there really is no inside or outside; there is only one reality. Integrity is the state of being whole and undivided.

You are invited to hold your Mobius strip and listen to some of the words of Psalm 139 as your prayer of affirmation and longing for this kind of life and to let God show you the way forward.

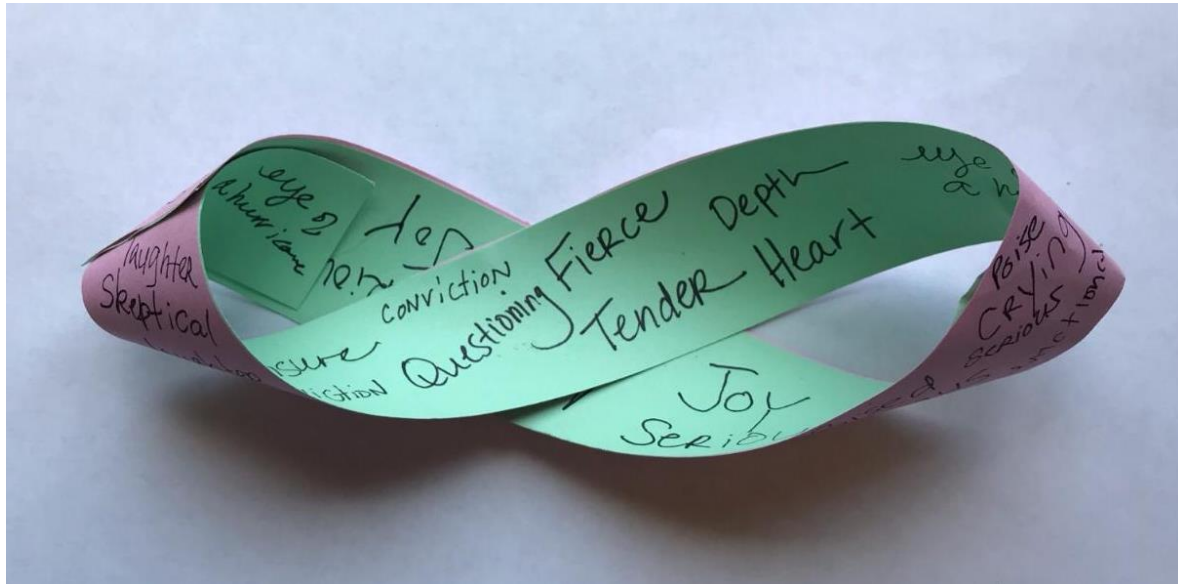
O my Beloved, You have searched me
and known me!
You know when I sit down and
when I rise up;
You discern my innermost thoughts.
You find me on the journey and
guide my steps;
You know my strengths and
my weaknesses.
Even before words rise up in prayer,
Lo, You have already heard
my heart call.

You encompass me with love where'er
I go,
and Your strength is my shield.

Such sensitivity is too wonderful for me;
it is high: boundless gratitude
is my soul's response.
Where could I go from your Spirit?
Or how could I flee from
Your Presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there!
If I make my bed in darkness,
You are there!

If I soar on the wings of the morning
or dwell in the deepest parts of the sea,
Even there your Hand will lead me,
and your love will embrace me.
If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
and the light around me be night,"
Even darkness is not dark to You,
and the night dazzles as with the sun;
the darkness is as light with You.

You formed my inward being,
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise You, for You are to be revered and adored.
Your mysteries fill me with wonder!
More than I know myself do You know me;
my essence was not hidden from You. Amen.



MÖBIUS STRIP EXERCISE

Take a strip of paper (If you want to make an actual Möbius Strip, the paper would be *approximately 11" x 1"*, but you can do this as a simple journal exercise.) On one side, write about your outer life. What roles do you play? What do most people see when they look at you? On the other side, write about your inner life: values, beliefs, dreams, private identities.

Outside (explore some or all of these questions)

- What words might people use to describe you?
- How do you contribute or have impact on your community?
- What characteristics do people see when they look at you?
- What roles do you play?

Inside (explore some or all of these questions)

- What words are most important when you describe your true self?
- What would someone not know by looking at you?
- What are some of your underutilized gifts or something you have always dreamed of doing?
- I am embarrassed to tell people...

Reflection Questions

1. Spend some time reflecting about what surprised you about what you wrote.
2. Where are the differences between the inside and the outside of your Möbius Strip? What do they have to teach you?

3. Where are the connections, overlaps, and synchronicities between the inside and the outside of your Möbius Strip? What do they have to teach you?
4. Where are the through lines that help you see the connections between your inner and outer lives?

Connecting Your Möbius Strip

Once you have written on both sides, take one end in your left hand and one end in your right. Twist the right hand $\frac{1}{2}$ turn, then pull the strip toward you and connect the ends with a piece of tape. What you should see is a multi-dimensional image of your inner and outer self, flowing as one.