

I Don't Believe in Souls, but My Soul Does

by Suzy Weiss '13

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When I was six, I began to question my mental image of God as the cartoon version of Ichabod (Ichabod, I called him) Crane, lounging on a cloud with a cane in his hand. I do not know how this image arose. I asked my father what God looked like. He — not so much an atheist as an apatheist, which means exactly what it sounds like -doesn't remember this, but he said something like, "God looks like everything; God is everywhere."

That day, my father planted the seeds for my later intellectual pursuits the way parents usually pivotally influence their children: with no intention to do so. If God is in everything we see, I wondered, why are adults fussing over whether or not he exists or which version is right?

My skeptical stages arrived in this order: Easter Bunny (though my parents provided convincing evidence that said bunny had "shed" in the hallway, my Jewish cousins exposed the fuzz balls of Mr. Cottontail as cotton balls), Santa Claus (I felt so foolish; how could I have let this happen after the Easter Bunny episode?), Tooth Fairy (though I continued feigning belief for financial profit), God. My spiritual skepticism was justified: Look at all the times I'd been deceived before! This sequence necessarily stops at age six so I can spare you the explanations of my skepticism about the self, moral absolutism, moral relativism, skin care products, etc.

But it wasn't until high school that the idea of no God or no soul deeply troubled me. If we are all just molecules bouncing around, our existence must be unintentional. And if our existence is unintentional, we're here for no purpose. And if we're here for no purpose, well, what are we doing here?

The things that once seemed meaningful to me, I began to see as inherently meaningless and arbitrary. I developed the habit of comparing my acquaintances to lower primates, wondering how their behaviors had evolved to enhance their reproductive success. I drove my parents crazy with hackneyed questions like "If morals were just made up by people, why should other people follow them?" (exactly what the Church founders did not want to hear) and "What's the point of improving your life if it will culminate in death anyway?"

This was when I developed a disdain for the pursuit of happiness. This lofty proclamation of man's rights was really just the pursuit of serotonin and dopamine, exactly what our animal ancestors' evolution programmed us for. Pursuing happiness seemed equivalent to being natural selection's puppets. Happiness was a chemical reaction that evolved to reward organisms for behaviors advantageous to survival and reproduction. And those founding fathers thought they were so profound and dignified!

After all this curiosity about meaning, it makes sense that I decided to major in semiotics. The study of meaning was, paradoxically, my way out of obsessing over it. I stopped giving my existential crisis so much weight when I realized all concepts, including "existence," were socially constructed. I couldn't find satisfying answers because I was asking the wrong question: The meaning of life was neither out there awaiting discovery nor tragically absent. The problem of finding it was a problem not with life itself but with our language. Once everything was meaningless, nothing was. Meaning became meaningless to me.

It's lucky I was armed with this revelation, because my second major in cognitive neuroscience confirmed my still disturbing fear of being biology's freedomless puppet. I learned that the pursuit of meaning, like the pursuit of happiness, is a neural product of evolution, chance and conditioning, a tool to make sense of the world I navigate, an instinct neither spiritual nor under my control.

But soon I realized this fear grew out of a lack of understanding of the topic. What it came down to was that we're not the puppets of our biology; we *are* our biology. Every thought and feeling has a physical correlate, some say basis. Why undervalue the physical in favor of the emotional or intellectual, when they're the same?

Ironically, my college education brought me back to the questions I pondered and lessons I learned as a first grader. I regained gratitude for the spiritual world I already live in, rather than seeking an abstract realm beyond. If God can be felt all over the world, as my dad still insists he never said, there is no reason to see

a worldly, animal existence as inferior. Instead of drawing a horizon line positioning the spiritual above the material, I could envision the two as part of the same world.

Some took issue with this insight, including my brother, a former English major. Until I began touting my newly acquired physicalism (the belief that everything consists of matter and/or energy), we had never fought about anything more serious than who made the microwave explode. Then, I was sharing my recent interest in the question of whether free will (control over one's fate) and determinism (the idea that everything is caused by something else) were compatible. I did not think they were. If brain cells work in a deterministic manner — that is, if their activities are caused by previous physical events, and studies suggest they are — so do our decisions, since our decisions are reducible to brain activity. It was this last point that he balked at. How could I go about life thinking of myself as a machine and still want to live, he wondered. I was deemed cold. He was deemed irrational. Objects were thrown. He stormed out feeling like his humanity was threatened. I left feeling like an unjustly shot messenger of scientific truth.

But I stuck to my stance, enhanced by half a course on free will and determinism, which I dropped because I had heard most of the arguments before and -- primarily, to be honest -- because I wanted to spend more time with my boyfriend. This last bit is ironic because the aforementioned boyfriend (I will call him John) was the incompatibilist* determinist's worst offender in my mind at the time, even more incompatible than the compatibilists**. He was a dualist, believing in an incorporeal soul presiding over the physical body.

*incompatibilist — somebody who believes free will and determinism cannot both exist

**compatibilist — someone of the philosophy that free will and determinism are compatible, a claim usually accompanied by a call for a physicalist definition of free will.

I was the head in our relationship; he, the heart. I went to the lab to become indoctrinated into the canon of the neural basis for everything; he went to church to become indoctrinated into the canon of Jesus. I knew things through information; he, through faith. Belief in a soul was my pet peeve, his salvation.

At this point, if there was a God, he/she/it had further plans for my education. It was at this point that I faced physicalism's greatest challenge: first love, which Einstein said could not be explained "in terms of chemistry and physics," yet called a "biological phenomenon."

I had read about love in psychoanalysis, brain imaging studies, literature, and philosophy, but I was biased — or perhaps too unbiased — before I met John because I had never been in love myself. Engrossed in looking at emotions from an academic perspective, I thought I knew everything worth knowing about them. What they felt like was irrelevant.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote that an outsider's perspective alone cannot reveal what it is like to be another creature or to have a feeling the observer has not had. An organism's biology can tell you the facts, but not the experience.

My understanding of the world included a sharp distinction between experience and fact. Studying cognitive neuroscience taught me that people could feel something that wasn't objectively true. Alien limb patients felt like their appendages were moving on their own, when really their own brains were moving the "alien" limbs without their awareness. People could be made to see colors on a black and white spinning wheel because their retinal firing became haphazard trying to keep up with the motion.

Motor schemas and retinas are factual, while colors and possessed limbs and love are subjective — some might even say illusory. Most of our lives fall under the latter category. We perceive from the inside out.

What love feels like is impossible to decipher from technologies that reveal what it looks like, such as brain imaging and skin conductance recording. But is love defined by how it feels or how it appears? Since the subjective emotion is elusive at best, illusive at worst, it is easy to discount it as incapable of explaining what is *really* (re: objectively) happening.

My skepticism about love and the soul decreased concurrently. There were two reasons for this. First, when you love someone, you have to confront and embrace every aspect of your lover. John held spiritual views I would have dismissed as foolish if they did not belong to someone I so admired. But I took them seriously because I took him seriously.

I spent one Saturday night holding his hand — more out of my vicarious pain than his actual pain — as he got "Amazing Grace" tattooed on his back. God had saved him from an injury from which he logically should have died, he felt. And who was I to deny that?

At the time, I was one to deny it. "There's some physical explanation," I'd argue; "scientists just don't know it yet."

Note to future self: Do not tell people the alleged miracles in their life didn't happen. Even if it's true, it's not nice.

What exposes my hypocrisy is that I participated in John's eclectic spiritual life when it suited me. His bedside table housed a crystal, hung from a string, that would answer his most dire questions. We watched it with the dazzled hypnosis of children attending to a high-tech and seemingly autonomous toy. First, we would hold the top of the string still and ask an obvious question, like "Is today Wednesday?" If it was indeed Wednesday, the crystal's first move — usually some vague circular or back-and-forth motion — was its way of saying "yes." To see the analogous "no" motion, we'd ask something obviously wrong, like "Is today Tuesday?"

Then it got to the exciting part: "Are Suzy and I going to be together for a long time?" (Yes; incorrect unless one takes a loose interpretation of "together" and "long.")

"Will I tell John I love him?" (Yes; correct, as I realized I did that night, and I'd like to think it wasn't a self-fulfilling prophecy.)

It was magic. Maybe it was the kind of magic that disappears once science interferes, the kind that is fleeting but seems eternal in the moment — not unlike our passionate but fast-dwindling love — but nevertheless magic.

This may seem a bit loopy, but it wasn't compared with my previous boyfriend, who was convinced he had communicated with Lucifer through an Ouija board and was preparing for the Seven Year War with the Bringer of Light's alliance. No, seriously, I can't make this up.

So I understand the craze about the supernatural, even as I mock it. I'm not sure if this is because of John or his mother, a toxin-avoiding, ghost-detecting, proudly kama sutra-practicing epitome of the New Age. "Be humble for you are made of Earth. Be noble for you are made of stars," her Facebook page preached.

Every time I got her — I'll call her Debbie; she was a first name kind of mom — talking, I was in for another uninteruptible discussion of past lives and harnessing energy from Mother Earth, replete with a lexicon including "path," "vibrations," and "synergy." She once informed me that Patches, John's beloved guinea pig, anticipated my visits because she could "sense female energy" (I spared her the lecture on gender essentialism). She also confided that her son was a "natural healer," which sounds like metaphysical mumble jumble, but, knowing him, was fact. Sometimes I think Debbie was right as often as she seemed to assume, but on a plane that rarely intersected with Earth's.

The other reason my first love opened my mind to the metaphysical is that the relationship felt like a union of souls, not cells. What drew us together, despite different circumstances, personalities and beliefs that ultimately proved insurmountable, was something evident in, yet predating, our conversations, mutual understanding and shared experiences, something too sacred to speak. Maybe this something was a soul. But that does not mean it was our soul, and it does not mean we have souls.

"Having" implies possession, and possession implies control. If I had control over my soul, I would take it to the soul psychiatrist to get it help with its Tourette's, so it would stop screaming soap opera lines like "we were supposed to grow old together!" and "guardian angels are watching over me" at the most inopportune times.

The explosive fight with my brother and the debate over John's trip to death's door were arguments between the symbolic mind and soul. I know this because they sounded just like the discordant din of my own head and heart. They can't accept each other's arguments because they don't agree on any of their premises or the logic binding them. Both are persuasive but neither listens. Both are correct but neither wins.

I don't feel like I have a soul, but sometimes I feel like a soul has me.

I use the phrase *feels like*, as opposed to the fact of the matter (pun not intended). To someone studying love, the feeling is irrelevant. To someone in love, the fact is. The feeling is in the soul; the fact is in the cells. But despite this difference in how physiology and emotions are experienced, maybe they're the same. "We have souls," said mathematician Guilio Giorello. "They're just made of tiny robots."

Of a non-physical soul, I remain skeptical. What would that even look like? How would its interaction with physical substances be possible? And what is the need for such a false dichotomy, when the spiritual and moral experiences we so highly value have a physical basis? Everything from religious experience to ethical judgments to love has a neural correlate. The physical is not inferior to, but rather inseparable from, the mental and emotional. This may make the mental and emotional seem meaningless — hence my early teen existential angst — but it could also make the physical seem meaningful.

So instead of seeking a transcendent state beyond the worldly, I've decided to appreciate the world as the source of this very transcendence. The elevation of the immaterial depends on the debasing of matter. This

not only is based on a false dichotomy between the mind and brain, but also necessitates the denial of our animal nature and bodily desires, which never sat well with me.

Very few things have. Every time I think I know something, a subsequent event makes me skeptical. And every time I become skeptical, something else comes along to make me skeptical of my skepticism. I've looked for the metaphysical in mysteries that unraveled between the spindle fibers of information. I've traced the motions of a crystal with my eyes and the words of an Ouija board with my fingers but received little that my arms or head could grasp. I've looked at pictures of brains like vehicles and wondered who's in the driver's seat, only to learn how they run and regulate themselves. I've deconstructed my way into the Platonic Realm and only found more shadows. I've denounced psychics then heard them say more about me than anyone could logically know. I've accepted that my dead loved ones are gone for good only to receive signs from them later. I've tried to listen to my heart and silence my mind but found that my heart has a mind of its own.

Maybe that's why, when John came to my dormitory one Wednesday afternoon and said we were completely different people and it could never work, I shouted something like, "Our brains may be wired differently, but we have the same soul!" Some would say I stooped to an unprecedented low that day, and my rational side agrees. But I still couldn't shake the intuition — perhaps an intuition of my "higher self," as the New Age spiritualists would say, or of my "lower level cognitive processes," as the neuroscientists would say; I'm starting to think they're the same — that, whatever souls are made of, ours were — *was* - the same.

My friends' worst attempts to help me through the breakup involved reasoning with me. "You'll find someone better," they said. I didn't want to. "You'll get over him" was another line. Maybe I will, I retorted, but my poor fatherless stuffed animals never will. Some, picking up on my trust in science, cited facts and figures. My attachment to him was a hormonal part of pair bonding; that was what was *really* happening.

What was "really" happening, I am now inclined to think, was the feeling. The facts simply happened concurrently with, and may help explain, the conscious experience. Speaking to my brain, with its affinity for facts, was useless. I didn't feel the heartache in my head. I felt it in my heart.

Matter and energy are the building blocks of my mind, and thus the building blocks for the spiritual views that stem from it. If there is an existence that transcends the material, I speculate that it is made of energy, that dreaded, abstract word Debbie used to describe Patches' sixth sense. Yet the realm of souls and psychic energy is not an abstraction to me. I know exactly what it is like. I have been there. I was there when I dreamt my cat was dying and superstitiously but luckily rushed home to pet and snuggle him before his unexpected death. I was there when I tearfully thanked an unnamable God for creating the boy lying beside me, pure and perfect and sleepily beautiful, breathing my breath. Sometimes I still am there; sometimes we still are. When I take a deep breath and un-tether myself to this location in space-time, I feel like matter, but not in the solid state. I feel like buoyant matter, floating toward those with the same soul, the same tiny robots.